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An English fan translation of *No.6 Reunion #1,* by Asano Atsuko.

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Now, what shall I do from here?

Shall I continue the story, or end it?
If you so desire, I'll let you hear it
Or, if you so desire, I can end it here
The choice is yours

You still want to hear the rest?
The rest of the story of two boys and No.6
No, it's not that I don't want to tell it. I'm not tired, either

Fatigue and the like are not something I experience to begin with. Neither illness nor despair have ever befallen me, nor animosity, rage, or sorrow. My heart won't be moved by anything in this world

Do I have a heart? Is that what you asked?

Hm, I do wonder. What is the nature of that which you call a "heart?" ...Heh heh, that’s not a question you can answer. Nor can I, for that matter

My desire to speak, however, might be stronger than yours to listen

Of No.6

Of those two who continued to fight, to resist, and who never surrendered their will to survive throughout it all

Chapter 1: One More Time

“Oh, my dream, my sweet, my beautiful orchard!…My life, my youth, my happiness —good-bye…Good-bye!”

- “The Cherry Orchard” by Anton Chekov. Translated by Michael Henry Heim. The Modern Library, New York. eISBN 978-1-58836-266-7

⁂

He took a book from the shelf. It was a drama written decades ago, a story about a woman losing her youth and a man who had already lost his falling headfirst into a love akin to madness.

To love is to be mad. Any sane love isn’t love at all—just a cheap imitation. Terrifying, no? But we can’t go back now. No—I don’t want *to go back.*

The open page was covered in the man and woman’s dialogue.

The worst of the storm was over. According to the forecast, it would completely pass through No.6 late in the

evening. Even so, the view from his office window was so dark that one wouldn't think it was early afternoon. Even as the rain shower steadily softened, the wind showed no sign of letting up. The trees lining the road swayed; raindrops streamed down the windowpane and left diagonal streaks.

There was a knock on his door. *Rap, rap, rap*. Three of them, precisely spaced.

"Come in," said Shion, slowly turning his head. As if timed to the movement, the door opened quietly and carefully. In came a tall, thin young man. He had hair so red it caught the eye, and a smattering of freckles across his cheeks, too. Everyone called him "Red-haired Torey."

"Chairman, we've received some responses." Torey removed his glasses and breathed on the lenses. It was a habit of his. Whenever Torey was excited, or at a loss, or particularly flustered, he always took off his glasses and blew on them, as though he could control his feelings that way. Shion had caught on to it shortly after Torey, who was three years older

than him, started working as his secretary. It wasn't something that deserved reproach; rather, it simply meant he needed to develop the self-mastery to conceal his feelings. "No.1, 2, 3, and 5. Each city gave their agreement."

"And No.4?" asked Shion.

"Nothing, yet."

"Is that so…."

"The leaders of the other four cities have proposed holding an executive summit without No.4," said Torey.

"I see…" Shion mused.

"What are your thoughts?"

"Please update the schedule with information about the summit," said Shion. "Inform No.4 of the situation as well, and send a message asking them to reconsider. Urge them as politely as possible. As many times as it takes."

"Throw ourselves at their feet, essentially," said Torey.

“Essentially. We must impress upon them the significance of a six-city summit. Politely and persistently.”

After a beat, Torey replied, “Understood.”

“Why do you think No.4 is hedging on sending a reply, Torey?” asked Shion, taking a seat at his desk and looking up at his red-haired secretary.

“Well… Chairman, we—No.6, that is—did take the initiative regarding the development of a league of cities. Could it be that their apprehension stems from the fear we might use that to our own advantage? …At least, that seems likely to me.”

“If that’s the case, then what should we do?”

After a moment’s silence, Torey answered, a slight edge to his voice.

“Are you asking if we ought to proceed without No.4?” said Torey.

Shion looked past Torey's round glasses and into his seemingly timid eyes. He knew that the man wasn't nearly as timid or cowardly as he appeared.

Torey continued. "I believe we should first hold the conference with No.1, 2, 3, and 5, form a consensus, and present a united front. If we do so, even No.4 would think twice about choosing to go their own way, wouldn't they?"

"That makes sense. I see your point."

It had been two years since Shion had become the head of the Restructural Committee. The reformation of the once-destroyed city-state of No.6 had been proceeding surprisingly smoothly. Government function had been limited for a period, with the Restructural Committee shouldering the burden of administration in its stead. During that time, the committee would shore up the functions of the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government, and then ask citizens for their input, whether positive or negative.

There was the dismantlement of the Security Bureau; the overhaul of the police force; the stabilization of citizens' livelihoods; the maintenance of municipal and economic function; the four Blocks, especially when it came to integrating the former West Block; the gradual elimination of Chronos, the special ward inside the old city….

That was the reform taking place inside the city, but apace with that, they were to work towards reestablishing relations with the other five cities outside, and secure an everlasting peace and harmony for the whole city, both within and without.

Internal politics and external diplomacy: those were the two wheels that they had to keep turning efficiently and effectively. If they failed to do that, then without them, there was little hope for restoration. That was the judgement Shion had made.

Once, this planet had been covered in green, abundant in water—a place suitable for the existence of the living beings known as "humanity." Though there were

scorching deserts and freezing permafrost, of course, humanity had lived in harmony with nature for thousands of years.

Humankind, however, could not suppress wars between its nations as a result of military might. Claiming they would only be used in limited areas, they began launching miniature atomic bombs. The planet's equilibrium, so precariously maintained up until that point, was destroyed in one fell swoop. Naturally, all life went extinct in the places that had been bombed, and they became known as "Dead Zones." In those areas, radiation contamination spread quietly, but at an unbelievable speed. At the same time, climate change had begun to progress even faster than its already rapid pace, and nature raged even in the farthest reaches of the planet. Torrential rains fell endlessly, rivers burst their banks one after the other, and devastating typhoons struck in great numbers. Mountains spewed fire; the earth quaked, broke, and eroded away. Droughts plagued once-fertile farmlands, and they became cracked, barren wastelands. Starvation ran rampant, radiation assailed

the land, and floods drowned all.

In the blink of an eye, inhabitable land had all but disappeared.

“It was almost like this planet had begun to exterminate humanity. It spared no effort in ridding itself of us, like the way white blood cells attack and eliminate cells afflicted by a virus.”

Thus had spoken an elderly person, their words preserved in an old record. They had been one of the few who had survived through it all, and those survivors, as best they could, had started to search for land above ground that would allow them to thrive. There were only six such places in the entire world, and in each of them, people built city-states, numbered one through six.
Such was history from before Shion was born.

Among those six city-states, the one that achieved the most remarkable development was No.6: a city-state where people could live in long-term safety and prosperity. Starvation, disease, unrest,

poverty, discrimination, prejudice, disparity, war…. It was a utopia that avoided such primary factors that prevented humankind from living like people, a holy city erected by humanity's concentrated intellect.

That was No.6.

We swore that we would never make mistakes again. We would never walk down a foolish path. We would safeguard the happiness of all the people born upon this land.

No.6 had existed for the sake of its citizens — it existed to ensure prosperous and comfortable lives for all of them. Not a single person who imperiled their safety, livelihoods, or lives had been tolerated. Within the city, no matter where or what the circumstances, all citizens were valued equally and treated with the care that people deserved.

Thus proclaimed proudly the many articles of the citizens' charter.

What a joke.

What had the old No.6 done instead? It had manifested a complete class hierarchy, had repeatedly exploited and slaughtered those who lived outside the city, and had oppressed people under the guise of keeping the peace. The only individuals who had been treated with any human dignity were those at the very top. People were assigned ranks without exception and forced to live according to them. It had been an effectively established system, and so those who had felt a sense of wrongness or contradiction, who had spoken out—or tried to—had been effectively eliminated. Some had been disposed of, some had been mentally destroyed, and others still had been driven to suicide.

What a joke. All Shion could do was laugh.

A utopia? How absurd. It was nothing but a dystopia completely saturated with despair.

Just as no utopia could last forever, though, there was no such thing as a dystopia without end. A society where the 1% controlled the other 99% was twisted at its core from the start. So, as time went

on, it would only grow more and more malformed. It would strain, creak, warp, and then fall to pieces all at once.

And so, No.6 fell.

If he closed his eyes, flames raged before him—the blaze of crimson fire that had engulfed the collapsing No.6 like an embrace.

“Chairman?” Torey blinked slowly. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Yes, you’re wrong,” said Shion.

“Wrong…?”

“You sound unconvinced.”

“Well, just a little…” Torey put his glasses back on and leaned down, facing Shion. “Chairman, up until now, any interaction with the other cities has been extremely unpopular. We established trade agreements and the exchange student system, and there has been some amount of mutual economic exchange, but, fundamentally, none of the six cities have ever prioritized mutual relations.”

”Yes,” said Shion. “There wasn’t ever time for that, it’s true. Each city always had their hands full maintaining their own internal order and function—they couldn’t afford to focus on diplomacy. But they all agreed, at least, on the most important fundamental: they ratified a treaty vowing that there would be no more war.”

“Yes, no matter the dispute, they vowed it would be solved through peaceful methods without the use of military power,” agreed Torey. “All six cities signed this pact… correct?”

“Correct,” said Shion. “They resolved that each city would aim towards peaceful conflict resolution, without maintaining an army or keeping weapons. All of the mayors accepted this agreement—the Babylon Treaty.”

Drawing lessons from the past in which wars between nations had invited environmental destruction and devastation of national territory, and even jeopardized the very existence of the human race, we learned from a peace treaty in which we renounced all

armies, and the ban on the storage, development, and use of any and all weapons was clearly documented.

Each city held to this as the sole method to prevent humanity's extinction. The treaty was named the "Babylon Treaty" after an old keep in No.4 where the accord was signed.

Leaning back in his chair, Shion let out a short breath. "All of the mayors accepted it, but the mayor of No.6 only pretended to do so. Perhaps he had no intention of honoring it from the start, or maybe his perspective slowly degenerated over time. Either way, No.6 kept a powerful military under the jurisdiction of the Security Bureau…."

"Those days are over, now." Torey shook his head. "Isn't that already all behind us, Chairman?"

"It was two years ago. It's only been two short years, Torey."

Two years ago, I saw it with my very own eyes. From the West Block, outside No.6

and the special alloy walls that enclosed it.

The West Block was a place where those expelled from No.6 gathered together and lived, also known as the outskirts. People were generally impoverished, suffering from starvation, hypothermia, and disease, and living in homes more akin to barracks, all the while faced with the sight of the imposing walls of the Holy City, bathed in light before them. Children and the elderly routinely collapsed from malnutrition. People would spill blood over a single scrap of meat or sell their bodies for a piece of bread. They were weak and powerless, and yet they were resilient. Even as No.6 turned their home into the dumping ground for the muck and rubbish it spat out, they transformed that into fuel, scavenging for things they could use, procuring food, and even building a marketplace.

No.6's army attacked that very marketplace.

At first glance, the vehicles that had arrived had looked like old armored trucks. But even those had been perfectly

sufficient to raze the market's tents and barracks. Most of the buildings collapsed just by the mere power of their advance. Even worse, the seemingly outdated vehicles had actually been outfitted with cutting-edge equipment.

Equipment like a sonic cannon. The two-story barracks, rare in the West Block, were instantly blasted to smithereens by the force of it. It had possibly been part of a trial run for using the weapon in earnest and No.6 had chosen the West Block as a test site for the capabilities of its new soldiers.

More than half the people at the market had been women and children. Babies strapped to their parents' backs, old people who could barely walk, pregnant women, and young children begging for food had all been among them. They had been people who couldn't fight beyond throwing rocks. It was their homes that were razed by tanks, they who were shot down without warning by silent soldiers.

It had been a unilateral massacre.

It had happened right in front of him.

Shion had witnessed No.6's brutality and army with his very own eyes.

Look, he had said to Shion. *Look, this is reality. Don't you ever avert your eyes from reality. Sear it into your memory of your own volition.*

He would sear it all into his memory. He would stare reality in the face, without concealment or deception.

"But, Chairman," said Torey. "Circumstances are completely different now from how they were two years ago. No. 6 has been born anew. It's no longer the same No.6 of the past."

"Listen to me," said Shion. "Those unwilling to submit, those who did not agree with our views—to be frank, those who simply did not obey: No.6 dubbed them all enemies and eliminated them. Isn't that right?"

Torey bit his lip, then slowly acquiesced. "…You're right. That was what happened

to both my mother and father. Like you said, they were eliminated."

Shion turned his gaze back to his secretary. "Your parents…. Did they pass away?"

"Yes, they did," said Torey. "They were both freelance journalists, and on the day I turned fifteen—yes, right on my fifteenth birthday—someone from the Security Bureau suddenly came and took them both into custody. It was only later that I learned…that they were being investigated for voicing concerns about corruption in the mayoral election…."

"Was it during their detainment that they…?" asked Shion.

"No, my father returned three months later. But it was like he had become an entirely different person…not on the outside, but on the inside. He never said a single word about the government after that, let alone the mayoral race. He stopped working, and shut himself up in his room. My grandmother looked after my younger sister and me, and we made ends meet that way. But one day, when I came

home from school…”

“Torey.” Shion stood up, shaking his head. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to dredge up your past, but I’ve still made you recall such painful memories. It’s okay. You don’t need to say anything more.”

Torey had been gazing slightly down, but he raised his head and gave a small smile. “No, please let me speak, Chairman. I’ve actually always wanted to tell someone. If you’re willing, it would be the highest honor. But am I inconveniencing you? We’re in the middle of the workday, and it’s truly nothing more than a personal story…”

One wall of Shion’s office had been removed, and was connected to an area full of busy municipal employees. Conscientious people who knocked before entering like Torey were few and far between; most entered and exited at will.

Shion had moved the office that had once been at the top floor of the Moondrop to the second floor. Most of the top floor had been converted into a viewing platform

and assembly hall, and was open to the public, except for one section in particular: the former mayor's office. It was there that the mayor had taken his own life on the day No.6 fell. His remains had been removed, but the spattered bloodstains in the carpet were left as-is. Shion had *wanted* them to be left as-is.

He couldn't act as though they had never been there. He had to keep them fresh in his mind. He had to.

It was of the utmost importance not to pretend that reality had never happened: that those young revolutionaries, holding tightly to hope and idealism, had become cruel dictators themselves. Shion was not allowed to forget the folly of the atrocities, the slaughter that No.6 had committed, and all that they had corrupted. He had to remember unfalteringly what it all meant, and why they could not prevent a utopia from turning into a dystopia. He had to remember the things that they had perverted.

He could not repeat those same mistakes.

Sometimes, Shion would go up to the top floor and stand in front of the former mayor's spilled blood. He would bite down on his lip—perhaps to figure out what he was supposed to do, perhaps to take in the truth—and continue to think it over, without forgetting.

Shion,

he had called to him. He had said:

Don't look away. Commit it to memory. Think it over again and again. That's what you're supposed to do.

That's right, that's what I'm supposed to do. He understood. He understood it so well he could barely breathe.

That's why I remained here. I didn't call out for you as you faded into the distance under that brilliant blue sky. I knew what I had to do, so I didn't chase after you. And…for as long as it takes me to accomplish it, you won't let me in. You'll knock aside my outstretched hand and refuse me. You'll only continue to refuse me.

He knew this down to the marrow of his bones.

“Please tell me everything,” Shion said slowly, and faced Torey. “If it won’t be painful for you…no, of course it would be painful. But if you can speak through the pain, I want to hear it. I want to know every last detail of what happened inside this city. Not just what remains of official record, but the truly personal stories of individual people.”

Connecting together those individual experiences would draw the truth of the Holy City’s history to the surface. Those who could not face the past head-on had no chance of creating the future.

Torey steadied his breathing and bowed his head. “Thank you, Chairman. There isn’t much left to tell, however. That day, when I came home from school, neither my father nor my sister were there. My grandmother, in a panic, told me they had vanished when she had gone out to do some shopping…. She begged me to go hurry and bring them back…. But neither she nor I had any idea where they had

gone. It was no secret that my father had been apprehended in the past, so perhaps out of fear of the authorities, none of our neighbors helped look for them. All by myself, I searched everywhere I could think of, but I could't find them…. They were both discovered the next morning."

At the word "discovered," Shion's heart sped up. They hadn't been "rescued," but "discovered." It seemed to him that Torey was distinguishing between a person and an object through his choice of words.

"Where…were they…?"

"In the middle of the woods, where the old North Gate was…. The deciduous forest near the airport. They were lying nested close together, at the base of what I think was probably a beech tree. They weren't injured, and they didn't seem to have suffered…. Of course, that's only what I could observe from the outside. My father used poison to murder himself and my sister."

"Murder." Shion tried whispering it aloud. Even though words were supposed to have

no physical substance, it felt as though it pierced the inside of his mouth.

“Yes, murder,” said Torey. “My sister was still only a child. She did not yet have the self-awareness to desire death. My father made his own child drink poison, then drank it himself. It was murder, clear as day.”

“Did you never wonder if they could have been killed?” asked Shion. “At the hands of the Security Bureau, using some underhanded method, or…” He shut his mouth. It was completely implausible. If the Security Bureau had decided to eliminate Torey’s father, they wouldn’t have needed some subtle trick. They simply would have had him apprehended and executed. There would have been no need to make it look like a suicide. Even so, it was still a murder caused by No.6. Whether direct murder or indirect coercion towards death, the only difference was semantics. Breaking someone’s mind and driving them into a corner until they could no longer bear to live—that had been the Security Bureau’s usual tactic.

“He left a suicide note,” said Torey. “I found it while going through his effects. It was undoubtedly his handwriting, and he wrote of his despair. ’I can’t continue to live inside No.6. I can’t escape from here, either. This is a place without a future; a place with no future, and no hope, from which death is the single way out. No matter how many times I consider it, I can’t leave my little girl behind in a place of such despair.’ Those were the words he wrote. I recall he also asked my forgiveness for taking my sister with him, and closed with gratitude toward my grandmother and me.”

“I see….”

“It’s such a shame.” Torey turned his gaze toward the large glass window. Shion supposed the wind had mostly died down; rain fell to the ground in straight columns. He followed the trails left behind by droplets on the glass, appearing one after another.

He remembered the doctor.

After fleeing the Correctional Facility in

what had been the West Block, Shion and his companions had returned to the old No.6 covered in injuries, and the doctor had been the one to kindly treat them. He had spoken of his younger brother, telling a story of how, as a young student, his brother had refused to participate in the custom common in workplaces and schools of swearing loyalty to the city every morning.

His brother had been detained somewhere for two weeks on suspicion of plotting treason against the city, and, as the doctor had put it, had come back dead and cold. “Not as a corpse,” he had said. “He was alive. But if he had been dead, nothing would have felt different about him. There wasn’t anything left of my bright, energetic brother, the captain of the basketball team. He barely spoke, didn’t respond when I called his name—he just stared vacantly into space, day after day….” Not long after that, the doctor had continued, his brother had taken his own life.

The stories of Torey and the doctor had similarities. They had similarities, but they

weren't the same, and Shion couldn't treat them as if they were. He wouldn't fall prey to the allure of statistics or lump all of No.6's victims into one. He wouldn't sweep them all under the collective label of "victim." He would uncover each individual person's death and remember them. He would remember them. Their cries, their fear, their courage, their struggles, the miracle of their lives, the stories they left behind—he would carve each one into his memory and never let them fade. He would pass down this true history.

If he didn't, No.6's rebirth would simply vanish like a ghost. Those who didn't learn from the past couldn't create the future.

Isn't that right…Nezumi?

Shion closed his eyes for a moment.

He saw scarlet flames—flames that threw their arms around No.6 like an embrace as they burned it to the ground. He could see a silhouette, back turned to the inferno. He could see hair, whipping around in the hot wind, and eyes, deep grey.

The flames were nothing more than a backdrop.

Shion opened his eyes.

Torey let out a sigh. “My father was too quick to despair. Beyond that, it was terribly foolish of him to be so wrapped up in it that he even took his young daughter with him. Had he lived in the No.6 of today, he could have put his despair behind him, and my sister had her own future ahead of her, and yet…. The more I think about it…it really is a complete travesty. A travesty, and deeply regrettable.”

Torey’s gaze returned to Shion. “Just last month, actually, I found my mother’s name and photograph in the Security Bureau’s database. After she was taken into custody, she was immediately executed…as a traitor to the state. Likely she had rebelled against being told to comply unconditionally with writing only articles that painted the city in a good light. I let my grandmother know right away. We hadn’t known until then just what had happened to her.”

“I trust your grandmother is still in good health?” asked Shion.

”She’s doing quite well,” said Torey. “When I told her about what happened to my mother, she muttered, ‘She was always that kind of girl.’ I thought she might cry, but she didn’t shed a single tear. These days, she’s working to support orphans from the old West Block, and acts as a representative of a volunteer group called “Tomorrow’s Sky.” Ah, her group recently even got a substantial grant from the city—the city expressed that they want to form a partnership to work together in the future. She was so excited.”

“‘Tomorrow’s Sky?’ I’ve heard of them,” said Shion. “They’re an NGO working on a project to provide a home and educational facility for orphans, aren’t they? I believe we had staff dispatched from the Education and Culture Department and the Children’s Department to assist them. So she’s right in the middle of all that activism? That’s amazing.” A note of praise unconsciously entered Shion’s voice. “She sounds very tough and forward-thinking. What an

incredible grandmother you have. I'm glad you have someone like her by your side."

"I feel the same way. Her strength has been my support." A shy smile appeared on Torey's face. "She made her decision in her own way, and put her best foot forward, I think. Actually, I feel as though both of us had a weight lifted from our hearts. It's still a burden I carry, of course, but it has eased. I was able to visit my father and sister's graves and properly tell them both about what happened to Mom, and about the reformation of the city, too. Chairman, because the old No.6's data was released to the public, many have finally been able to find out what happened to their loved ones, much like me with my mother. In other words, many bereaved families have been able to breathe more easily, just like my grandmother and I."

The majority of data entries simply said "eliminated." Names of people like Torey's mother who had been buried without anyone's knowledge were listed one after another. There were no remains or personal effects left for over half of them.

Had there truly been this many victims?

A chill had run down his spine countless times as he had prepared that data for public release.

No.6 had continued on, devouring people all the while.

Shion wondered if the feelings of those left behind after their loved ones were swallowed up were able to lighten at all, just as Torey's had. Not just inside the old city, either: the people of the former West Block, used cruelly and unfeelingly, who had been killed and annihilated like insects, without once having had their innate human worth acknowledged—what was it like for them?

Right now, they were still blanketed in the remnants of their joy. They still remembered that the word "hope" had its basis in reality, and their faces were turned up towards the future.

Joy, however, was a temporary thing. What would take its place once it cooled and disappeared?

Resentment, hatred, grief, suspicion, discontent, dissatisfaction…. The walls surrounding No.6 may have been taken down, but the boundaries within people's hearts couldn't be dismantled so easily.

Deep within their hearts, citizens of the old city harbored a hatred and fear of former West Block residents. They wondered if, one day, those people would take their revenge. Former West Block residents, too, doubted, detested, and feared in turn those former citizens. Considering the days that had led to the present, it was no wonder that they would feel such emotions.

"It's so difficult," mused Shion.

"What?" Torey tilted his head in question. "What's difficult, Chairman?"

"Making despair a thing of the past, the way you have. It's enormously difficult. After having had their loved ones cruelly stolen away, how can those left behind live on without despairing? Will everyone from the former West Block believe in the hope of the new No.6? How…? It's such a hard

knot to untangle that it makes me feel lightheaded. I can't unravel it one bit," Shion admitted frankly.

Torey let out another breath. "…Chairman, you lived in the former West Block, correct?"

"Yes, I did."

"You must have experienced very harsh circumstances there. I can't even imagine how wretched the conditions must have been. I lost my family, and that was an immense hardship, but I was privileged enough to not be living on the brink of starvation or freezing to death, as I was safe inside the walls."

"Yes…that's true, but…" Shion trailed off.

If one was lucky enough to be recognized as a citizen inside the walls, a basic standard of living was guaranteed. One could go one's whole life without starvation or hypothermia.

"I feel terrible for the residents of the former West Block," continued Torey.

“Their human rights went basically unacknowledged, and they were horribly persecuted as a result. Everyone was forced to live in misery. Anyone who fell sick or got injured couldn’t get proper care, right? I heard that there was never enough food and other daily necessities, and even in the middle of winter, people didn’t even have a single coat to wear. It sounds like the old West Block was nothing short of hell. Hm? What is it, Chairman?” Torey sucked in a breath and looked at Shion—Shion had shaken his head.

“Who did you hear all that from?” Shion asked.

“What? Well…no one in particular, but… I’m in the middle of digitizing No.6’s history for posterity,” said Torey. “Not just history from inside the old city, but all of it, including the former West Block, just as you yourself tasked me to. It will take some time before it’s complete, but I was able to come to an awareness of how terrible conditions in the old West Block were. Or at least, I thought I had….”

“You might be mistaken in that regard as

well," said Shion.

"What…?"

"The West Block certainly could have been compared to hell," Shion said. "You couldn't receive sufficient medical treatment, starvation ran rampant, and people perpetually brushed shoulders with death. Worst of all was the Manhunt."

"The Manhunt?"

"It was the most diabolic, inhuman sin ever committed by No.6, yet to be recorded."

Even now, he still dreamed of it, waking tormented by nightmares in the night. He saw them all in his dreams—the dead, their prayers spiraling up to heaven; cries of mortal agony; spraying blood and sundered flesh that had flown about; pools of blood staining the ground every which where; the pervasive stench that filled his nostrils and would never fade; and the bodies—the countless bodies, lined up on the conveyor belt to be disposed of the same as trash. He had seen them with his very own eyes. He had heard them with his

very own ears. He had smelled them with his nose, and felt them with his skin. "Hell" was too mild a name for that event—the weight of its sins couldn't be explained away with a single word.

Even so, Shion bit his lip. Looking up at his secretary, he said, “Nonetheless, I know this to be true. Torey—it wasn’t all hell. That place wasn’t all hell.”

Human life had taken root there. People clinging to existence with everything they had had still managed to live their lives. They had worked, they had found small joys, they had loved others, and they had lived all the while searching for whatever wisdom and means they could. There had been a market; there had been a theatre; there had been a half-crumbled hotel.

Shion stood in front of the window and put his hand to the glass. Every time he thought back on his time in the West Block, his chest ached. If he could only return to those days once more, then he would have no regrets.

The books squeezed into the shelves; the

small stove; the pot on top of it that filled the room with steam; the faded sofa and stiff, starchy blanket; the chirps of the mice and their cold little noses; the gleaming color of eyes; the fingers that concealed powerful strength and delicate movement; the resonance of that voice, warming despite its cool tone; the deep quiet that enveloped his body even as they sat facing each other; how comfortable that quiet felt; “Shion.” The surge of joy when his name was called out of nowhere; the savor of meager food on his tongue; gazes, sighs, and whispers.

It wasn’t all hell. Those days tinged with a sweet ache and all kinds of emotions—I lived through them, without a doubt.

If he could go back to those days one more time…. *Just one more time, if I could only reach my hand out to you; if one more time, I could…to you….*

Shion looked back and clenched his fingers into a fist. “There is much truth that has not yet come to light about the old West Block. We have representatives from there serving on the Restructural Committee,

and as the Committee, how will we face them? Everything depends on what we do going forward."

"Yes," agreed Torey. "While it won't be an easy road, I believe we can learn to live together. There aren't walls anymore—it won't do to forever be ensnared by the idea of 'inside' and 'outside.'"

"'Live together,' you say."

"Yes. I absolutely believe we can—no, I *know* we can." Torey spoke with an earnest expression, his tone filled with passion. It was rare for him to speak so fervently—while he hadn't yet figured out how to hide his feelings, Torey wasn't fundamentally an emotional person.

"You're exactly right, Torey," said Shion. "That's why foreign diplomacy is all the more important. In order to ascertain No.6's internal stability, we must also stabilize our relationships with the other cities. Firstly, it's necessary to explain and apologize regarding the reality that No.6 violated the Babylon Treaty. We'll also need an opportunity for No.6 to reaffirm

the peace and anti-war pact. But what's *always* been more critical than that is…."

Torey held his breath. "The survival of humanity, yes?"

"Correct," said Shion. "That's why it's meaningless unless all six cities come to the summit. One city driven away will become the cause for great division. That's the one thing we must avoid at all costs. Humanity doesn't have any margin for error—we can't afford to be divided."

None of the cities had fostered close relations before now—they had left them lacking on purpose. A system was in place where each city produced and consumed nearly everything it needed on its own, without cross-city interfering or interference. There were, of course, open two-way trade routes. No.6, which was landlocked, imported seafood and a part of their industrial products from other cities, and exported pure elements such as silicon, germanium, selenium, and other semiconductors. It was the only city that could export semiconductors, so that was one reason No.6 had maintained

predominance.

Now, however, new circumstances had necessitated rethinking that policy. Surface pollution had started to gradually proliferate. Cataclysmic irregular weather phenomena were on the rise again, and areas of radiation pollution were cropping up everywhere. Desertification was also speeding up faster than predicted. It had been recognized that there had been partial environmental restoration, but it seemed that it would be outpaced by the rate at which pollution was spreading. If things continued as they were, the areas in which humanity could survive would shrink even further. That was directly connected to the extinction of humankind as a species.

They had to take action.

Shion believed he could share that impatience and sentiment with the leaders of the other cities. After all, No.1, 2, 3, and 5 genuinely welcomed the invitation to the leadership summit. As for the remaining city….

“No.4’s mayor is male, correct?” Shion asked Torey.

“Indeed,” Torey replied. “The mayors of No.1 and No.4 are men, and have both been in office for close to two years. The mayors of the other three cities—No.2, 3, and 5—are all women. While each of those three cities have laws against serving multiple terms, all three women were reelected for a second term in landslide victories. I’m sure you’re aware of all this, of course, so there’s no need for me to repeat myself. However, if you require detailed data on voting breakdowns, policies while in office, the results of public opinion surveys, the contents of their speeches, the existence of inter-city relations, and so on and so forth, I can have it prepared for you immediately.”

“That’s alright; I don’t need it.” Shion had it all in his head. “So in other words, the top dog of each city has life and political experience aplenty.”

“Yes,” said Torey. “Forgive me for phrasing it this way, but they’re old enough to be your parents.”

“A summit full of sharp-witted moms and dads, huh,” mulled Shion. “It’ll probably be so stiff and formal. It seems fairly likely that they may look down on me…. I’ll need considerable strength of will.”

“Indeed. The mayor of No.4 in particular seems to be a difficult character,” said Torey. “He once remarked that ‘Women and children should stay out of politics!’—understandably, it caused an uproar. Did you watch that news broadcast? It was in the middle of an assembly debate.”

“Yes, it certainly was a surprise,” said Shion. “To think that there are still people who can casually express such outdated views—honestly, I was astonished.”

“I was completely taken aback,” said Torey. “I nearly fell out of my chair, really! He often makes offensive remarks like that, though, as it seems he has some odd prejudices…. As a result of that, I think he's resistant to the fact that a summit might be held specifically due to your advocacy, and moreover, he's speculating that the issues he's spearheading might fall

by the wayside, and so he's stalling on responding regarding his participation. Does that make sense?"

"There's certainly that," agreed Shion. "But the real reason for the delay may not be because of an issue with the mayor's personal attitude. It might be something more practical than that."

"What do you think it is, if I might ask?"

"Look at this." Shion pressed a switch on top of his desk. A hologram appeared before his eyes, covered in numbers.

"Huh? What is this? Hmm…these names…." Torey swallowed. "Chairman, this…. It couldn't be!"

"I'm afraid so," said Shion. "That's the list of high-ranking bureaucrats who fled the old No.6, along with the amount of gold they took with them. Incidentally, over 80% of them fled to No.4."

"Isn't the quantity of gold bars listed here quite high? Ingots aren't all that small and portable…. Wait…when you add it all

together…hold on a minute. This is an entire quarter of the former No.6's yearly budget!"

"Indeed," said Shion. "Most likely, it was a secret hoard that only very high-ranking officials were aware of. There was a safe installed in the basement of the Moondrop—they took it from there."

"Yes, I'm aware," said Torey. "The safe had been emptied, right? That's how we know the ingots were taken, but I had no idea it was this much." Torey swallowed again. "But how do you know so precisely who took it, and how much it was?"

"Haha, they were in quite the rush and forgot to disable the security cameras, which captured those thieves perfectly for us in high-definition," explained Shion. "We must demand restitution, using that footage as evidence. That gold is No.6's property—we'll take it back no matter what. In order to do so, No.4's cooperation will be essential. I want to have that discussion individually with No.4, and naturally, I assume the mayor has caught on to this."

A small cry escaped from Torey’s lips. "So No.4's delayed reply implies they're coming up with a counter-response anticipating that discussion. Trying to buy time, as it were."

“I think that’s precisely right,” said Shion. “He doesn’t want to have a political discussion with a young upstart, so he’s delaying his response. As a mayor, he doesn’t seem to be that transparent or easy-to-understand, anyway. He’s a sly old fox of a politician—if he weren’t, he wouldn’t have stayed at the top for over two decades despite his insensitive remarks. No.4 isn’t as tightly regulated a state as No.6, and its journalism, including online reporting, functions healthily. No one is forcing cults of personality or one-sided ideals. The government isn’t exercising state power, and, in fact, complaints against the municipal government, even those with no factual basis, are published with regularity. Elections are also carried out fairly. Even so, he hasn’t toppled down from the top. The mayor is a master hand and has deep

knowledge of how to influence government. He's amazing, in a sense. I'm really impressed by him."

"…Chairman, this is no time to be impressed," admonished Torey. "We need to think about how we're going to negotiate with him and recover the gold. And not just the gold—we need to repatriate the bureaucrats who fled, try them in court, and sentence them."

"No," disagreed Shion. "I don't think there's any need to rush on that. Recovering the gold will be our priority."

"But, Chairman—" Torey leaned forward. His cheeks were flushed and his eyebrows were raised. "The officials at the heart of the old No.6 need to be tried for their crimes. The crime of mass murder, including my parents and sister; the crime of monopolizing wealth, the crime of attempting to control people…. And, of course, the crime of creating No.6. They have a mountain of crimes to pay for. We cannot let criminals do as they please as they enjoy living in the lap of luxury in a foreign state."

“There’s nowhere for them to run.” Shion turned off the hologram. “There’s nowhere to run in the entire world aside from six cities. Bureaucrats who have lived charmed lives up until now won’t even consider trying to make it out in the deserts or swamps. Escaping outside the city will be virtually impossible for them once we’ve formed an alliance with the other cities and then petitioned for their return. They would simply die—or starve, or go insane. They have no other options, and they know it. Additionally…” Shion looked at the young man in front of him. Red still tinged his cheeks. “They aren’t living as large as you might imagine. They may be under No.4’s protection to some extent, but I heard they haven’t been granted more than very limited freedom. It makes me think that, from the perspective of No.4, the city is essentially just monitoring, them knowing they will eventually be subpoenaed. They’re asking for our move, and, depending on circumstances, intend to use the officials as pawns in negotiations. It might be that if things go well for them, No.4 will make a play for

the gold, even if only half of it. Even just that would be a considerable victory for them."

"If so, No.4's mayor really is a sly old fox," said Torey.

"A very sly one," agreed Shion. "Frankly, I'm not confident that I can go head-to-head with him."

"If anyone can do it, you can. More than you might imagine." Torey heaved a great sigh, then bowed. "In any case, understood. I will urge No.4 to participate, as many times as it takes…."

"Thank you," said Shion. "I'm sure their mayor also recognizes the worsening dangers humanity faces. He knows he can't drag his feet forever; he's not so foolish a fox that he would."

"Leave it to me." Torey bowed his head again and turned away. He stopped before the door, however, and looked back at Shion. He pursed his lips, and a voice that was nearly a whisper came out. "Chairman."

“Yes?”

“Um…I have one more thing I’d like to ask, if that’s okay….”

“Go ahead,” said Shion.

“The mayoral election planned for next year—I heard a rumor that you won’t be appearing on the ballot….” Torey took off his glasses, and pursed his lips again.

This question was likely the real reason Torey had come by his office. Staring at his secretary’s stiff expression, Shion nodded slightly. “So there are rumors?”

“Yes, although they really are just rumors. I mean, surely…”

Right now, the Restructural Committee was shouldering the burden of No.6’s management. Citizens’ lives, financial affairs, foreign relations, and so on, were split up across different answering departments.

There just weren’t nearly enough staff able to take charge in the field. Reality was that

there was a lack of experts in all those different domains. Still, there was hope. People who could administer the city government had been surfacing to help fill the gaps, though at a slow rate, and about a quarter of them were young people from the former West Block.

This came as a shock to a not-insignificant number of former No.6 residents. The old West Block, where educational facilities were supposed to have been nonexistent, had been cultivating one young talent after the other. Those young people were hungry for education, and spoke of being able to learn new skills and experiences as the height of joy. Many had superb skill as engineers, excelled innately at the performing arts, or had honed their business acumen.

What the former No.6 had expelled outside its walls was potential for the future. Anything within an enclosed space would eventually shrivel up, wither, and die out.

Somehow or other, No.6's doors were now open to the outside.

Shion thought they had just barely made it in time. Despite a spate of continuous problems, No.6 had secured the path to survival, and now its administration had to move forward alongside it.

They would need to disband the Restructural Committee, and choose a new mayor and governmental assembly—through democratic election, of course. Preparations for it were proceeding at a rapid rate. It had already been announced to citizens that in about one year, there would be a simultaneous mayoral and congressional election.

Everything had to move quickly. There was no time to stop. If rushing through things caused tears or holes to appear anywhere, however, then it would all be for naught. The lead-up to the election had to be executed perfectly, without overlooking the smallest fault.

This election, after all, would foretell the future of No.6.

Citizen representatives would have to be impartially and equitably chosen, and

those chosen representatives would have to foster an impartial and equitable administration to ensure the city government's sound rehabilitation. Shion could not let any special rights or affluence be concentrated in the hands of only one particular individual or group. In order to not tread in the same ruts of what was once No.6, and in order to avoid repeating the same follies, the election had become more important and significant than anything else.

Shion didn't think a holy city would be born.

He didn't think utopia would be realized, either.

Anything made by human hands would always have flaws in some form.

We're imperfect…so we make mistakes. Recognizing that, and choosing to believe in the future regardless, was the first step forward—it wouldn't be a holy or ideal city, but a place where people would continue to make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, and live as the people they

were; the first step towards No.6 becoming, at long last, a state where that was possible.

“I’ll spare no effort to support the infrastructure for the election,” Shion said. “I believe this to be the duty I was appointed with, after all.”

“Chairman, you haven’t answered my question,” said Torey. “Everyone thinks you’re perfect for the job of mayor—that there isn’t anyone more suitable than you.”

“Torey.” Shion cut off Torey’s words with a slight shake of his head. “The mayoral election is irrelevant right now. Please focus on the matter of appealing to No.4.”

“…Understood.” Torey pressed his lips together, and at the same time there was a gentle knock on the door.

Ah yes, there was one other conscientious staff member. “Enter.”

The door opened, and a woman with brown skin and black hair entered. She had the same skin and hair color as Inukashi,

though she didn't have their wild long hair that grew unchecked and as it wanted. Instead, she wore her loose curls in a medium-length hairstyle, complementing her round eyes and cute button nose. "Excuse me, Chairman," she said. "Oh, Torey, I'm sorry. Were you in the middle of something?"

"Ah, no, Ruka, you're fine. I'm already done here. Um…well, if you'll excuse me, Chairman." Torey bowed, and fled the room, his cheeks colored even redder than before, with a blush growing high enough to reach his eyes.

"Am I interrupting?" Ruka asked. "I had a matter I wanted to report, so…. Chairman? Is something amiss? You're laughing."

"No, I just found it funny how surprisingly easy Torey is to read," Shion said.

So that's what was going on. *"Live together," was it?* Those words had a deeper meaning after all. How very like Torey.

"What?" Ruka tilted her head to the side, and a puzzled expression spread across her

face. “What do you mean, easy to read? Um, did I interrupt the middle of a story?”

“Ah, no, it has nothing to do with that,” Shion said. “Like Torey said, we were already done here. More importantly, you had something to report? Is it urgent?”

“No, rather…there's just been something that’s concerning me,” said Ruka. “The truth is, there’s been an incident— there have been what appear to be three successive murders.”

Ruka was from the old West Block, and her father, as the person who had been responsible for the marketplace, had arbitrated disputes and overseen agreements about where to open new shops. In other words, he had had considerable experience as a man of influence. Shion had heard that back when the old West Block had been nothing more than an ordinary town, Ruka’s mother had been an author of children’s books.

Neither of them had survived the Manhunt. Her father had been crushed under rubble, and her mother shot down by soldiers. It

may very well have been that the two of them had been buried in the mountain of corpses Shion had witnessed beneath the Correctional Facility.

Ruka, who survived to see the walls come down, had attended the free support school set up by the Restructural Committee for a year, and at the beginning of the current year, passed the civil service exam. As of right now, she was serving as a member of the Security Bureau.

The Security Bureau, of course, had been completely restructured. The unilateral control, the arrests and detainment without due cause, the military-like armaments—all of it was now banned. Security Bureau members who arrived on the scene were only permitted the bare minimum equipment needed in order to protect citizens' lives, property, and safety.

"A murder case…I heard that three days ago, a man was killed outside of Lost Town," said Shion.

"Indeed," said Ruka. "The body of a young man who died in seemingly suspicious

circumstances was also found before that, inside the old West Block. Then, this morning, another body of what looked to be a woman was discovered there as well."

"'*Looks* to be a woman?' What do you mean by that?"

"The body has decomposed significantly, and the sex of the corpse could not be determined visually. It's believed that a month has passed since she died," said Ruka. "None of the three victims were carrying anything that could give a clue as to who they were, and their DNA is currently being analyzed for identification purposes."

"I see…." mused Shion. "No matter how cold it is outside, though, a body that's been sitting out for a month must stink quite strongly. Why wasn't it discovered until now? Was it buried deep in the ground?"

"No. While it *was* buried, the grave was shallow, and apparently it did smell badly."

“But it still took a month until it was discovered?”

Ruka’s mouth twisted into a conflicted expression, one that looked caught between crying and laughing. “It’s the West Block.”

“What?”

“The rotting corpse was buried in a corner of the old West Block,” said Ruka. “People from there…well, they’re used to dead bodies. Including the smell.”

“Ah….” Shion’s reply caught in his throat.

Of course. Death swirled about the West Block like an eddy. It was here, there, and everywhere. The scent of blood, the stink of decay, final prayers, wretched corpses, anguished cries—the West Block was saturated in it all.

Ruka continued. “One aspect of my father’s job was helping the Disposers, first thing in the morning, collect the bodies of those who had died in the market overnight. Since it was a marketplace, there wasn’t

anything that especially reeked, but I did see bodies every day. And not just me—pretty much everybody did. We were completely used to it…which is why I think no one noticed this corpse. Only once the smell got bad did people start to care. That's the gist of it, I believe."

"I see…."

Shion was still naive, then. He was yet unable to arrive at such conclusions.

"Oh, but catching criminals is the job of the Security Bureau," Ruka said. "There's no need for you to get involved."

"Ah, of course," agreed Shion. "Even if I did get involved, I don't think I'm capable of a feat like catching a criminal!"

"You really aren't suited to work like that at all, huh?" said Ruka with a light laugh. Hers was a young person's smile, one without a care in the world.

It looked a lot like Safu's—the sincere smile of a girl.

Shion, I leave everything to you.

Those had been Safu's last words to him.

He accepted them wholly, he had told her. He wouldn't forget them for as long as he lived.

Ruka's expression sobered, returning to that of a twenty-year-old adult. "The reason I brought this to your attention was to urge you to be cautious. Chairman, you live in Lost Town, correct? Close to the former West Block, moreover."

"Yes, but…do you mean you think I might be targeted? Is there evidence pointing toward that?"

"There isn't," Ruka affirmed, sounding certain. "There is no current evidence that you are being targeted by the murderer. However, you commute from home to the municipal office by bike, which I worry might be somewhat dangerous. And so, well, you see…I realize I am overstepping my position, but might you consider commuting by car for the time being? Ah, I consulted with my supervisor for this suggestion. Should you approve of it, I will

arrange for a car."

"The Security Bureau believes the three deaths are part of the same string of murders, then?" asked Shion. "Setting aside for the moment whether there were one or multiple culprits, the fact that there's a murderer at large all the way from Lost Town to the former West Block is…well, it's a bit beyond my imagination. Were there no connections between the victims? They were all completely unrelated strangers?"

"They were," confirmed Ruka. "While the female victim has yet to be identified, we haven't been able to unearth any similarities between the two men. Age, physique, employment, home environment…not a single thing in common. But the method of murder was the same—for the woman, as well. All three had their throats cut by a sharp bladed object."

Shion stared at Ruka as she stood in front of him. "A sharp bladed object?"

"A knife, presumably. Military grade, or a

similar kind designed to be deadly. Additionally—and this might be a subjective statement—it was skillfully done. Decomposition notwithstanding, the men's bodies had such clean cuts that the coroner even expressed awe at them. According to the coroner, 'With a cut like this, the victim likely would have died without knowing what was even happening.' As such, we believe the murderer is someone highly skilled with a knife."

Ruka's words faded a little into the distance, and in turn, Shion's heartbeat pounded loudly in his ears.

A knife, military grade, clean cuts, highly skilled….

The words he had heard just then tumbled around wildly inside his head.

No, what I'm thinking of is inconceivable. There's just no way.

Shion breathed in, then out.

His heart began to quiet.

Impossible. Something like would be completely impossible.

“Chairman?” ventured Ruka.

“Ah, right. Understood,” said Shion. “I’m sure the Security Bureau is already on top of things without needing me to tell them, but please put out a public safety announcement about this, including to the affected districts.”

“Roger that,” said Ruka. “We also already increased the number of patrols in those areas. While the incident has made the news, many people in the former West Block still haven’t formed the habit of looking at it, so we plan on posting physical notices as well. While an old-fashioned method, it’s unexpectedly effective.” At that, Ruka blinked slowly. “Chairman, I know I’m repeating myself, but your home is in an affected area. Please be cautious. I truly believe you should avoid commuting by bike for the time being.”

“Is that so…. Ah, but, I’ll be alright,” said Shion. “I’ll hire a bodyguard.”

“A bodyguard? If so, please do take someone qualified from the Security Bureau.”

Shion shook his head gently, rejecting Ruka’s suggestion. “I happen to know someone, so I’ll hire a private bodyguard from them. There’s no need to use a City employee.”

The truth was that not only the Security Bureau, but all departments and positions were chronically understaffed, so he had no intention of simply moving someone around like that. Furthermore, the concept of commuting with some random Security Bureau member he didn’t even know frightened him just to think about… although that was perhaps overstating it.

It was the reality, however, that weighed on his heart, and that being the case, he’d choose without hesitation someone who would always be fun to have by his side.

“You happen to know someone?” asked Ruka.

“Yes,” Shion said. “I know someone who will lend me an excellent, first-class bodyguard should I ask for one.”

Ruka’s eyebrows narrowed slightly—it seemed she was evaluating Shion’s words. “Understood.” Her brow relaxed. “Well then, at least charge the personnel cost to the Security Bureau. We’ll treat it as a public expense.”

“Really? Thank you,” said Shion. “It’ll probably end up being some bone-in meat, dried fruit, and cheese every day. They might ask for two or three dried fish on top of that.”

“Huh? Bone-in meat….” Ruka’s mouth hung open. She blinked a few times in a row.

Shion pressed his lips together to hold in his laughter. Once more, he assured her he would be alright. “I’ll strike a deal with them for personal protection. That at least, I can do.”

“Roger that. I’ll inform my supervisor.” With that, Ruka left the room.

At some point, the rain had stopped falling, and the sound of the wind had grown quieter.

Why don't I visit Inukashi tomorrow?

As he strained his ears to hear the wind, he made up his mind to do so.

Inukashi. That wasn't their real name, of course. No one knew their real name—including Inukashi themself.

Inukashi was Shion's dear friend living in the old West Block. They had lived alongside dogs as far back as they could remember, sharing their life with them and making their living through lending them out, now just as much as they always had.

Back when No.6's walls still separated it from the West Block, dogs had been a useful tool in fending off the harshness of winter cold. While Shion had experienced it just once himself, sleeping next to a dog was comfortably warm, and people had taken advantage of Inukashi's services to stave off death from hypothermia.

Nowadays, a business district had been erected in the old West Block, and there were social services being set up for children and the elderly. As a result, the number of people who came to Inukashi looking to borrow dogs to ward off the cold had mostly dried up. It seemed instead that many people who used to live inside No.6's walls had started to come by looking to adopt dogs as pets or guard animals. Apparently, among them were those who asked to *buy* Inukashi's dogs instead of just renting them.

"But as a rule, I won't sell 'em unless there's a really good reason." Those had been Inukashi's words when Shion had met up with them recently. He had come by to deliver homemade pretzels and paninis from Karan. Inukashi, overjoyed, stuffed their cheeks with one enormous bite and chewed slowly before praising them: "They're so tasty that I'm gonna cry." Then, saying, "Here, a treat for mama's good lil' errand boy," they poured Shion some hot black tea. It seemed like all the color and scent had long gone out of the old leaves, but to him, they were more

delicious than any fancy beverage.

It was the taste of the West Block.

In Nezumi's room, he had tasted it countless times.

The white mug with the cracked rim was still in that room. The stove that they had used both as a heater and a cooking range, the sturdy old chair buried under books, the immeasurable vastness of his library—they had all been left just as they were. Shion would visit from time to time as his schedule permitted to clean, freshen up the air, and stay for a while. There had been times when he even found himself dozing off for a quick nap.

At times like those, a certain memory always awoke again inside of him, welling up clear as day in the space between dream and reality. That day, in that room buried in books, Shion had asked something of Nezumi.

"Would you recite 'Macbeth' for me?"

Nezumi looked back at him then, tilting his

head slightly to the side. “‘Macbeth?’ Which part?”

“Act five scene five, the passage right after Macbeth learns of his wife’s death. Please?”

“Why do you want to hear ‘Macbeth?’”

“Hm, I’m not sure. I just felt like hearing your Macbeth all of a sudden,” Shion had said. “Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, it’s no skin off my back.” Nezumi shifted slightly in his chair, then begun to recite:

> “‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage…’”

The serene voice, concealing a hidden passion; Nezumi’s profile, illuminated by lamplight; Shion’s own heart that had felt as though it were soaring high yet sinking into hidden depths—he remembered all of it so vividly. No matter how much time passed, it would never fade in the slightest.

Memories drew one back into the past so easily, even though all of it was still present—the mug, the stove, the chair, the books…

It was only their owner who was absent.

Shion took Inukashi’s proffered stainless steel cup.

“‘A really good reason?’ What would that be?” Shion asked, following a sip of tea. He turned his attention towards the person in front of him, rather than the one not there, managing somehow even if it was against his will.

“Really good is really good,” Inukashi said.

“Surely there are some ‘really good’ prerequisites, then, right?”

“‘Pre-recky-sits?’ What’s that? Somethin’ as tasty as Mama Karan’s bread?” Inukashi asked.

“It’s nothing edible,” Shion said. “When you give a dog up to someone, what do you base that decision on? That’s what I want to know.”

“Ah, gotcha,” Inukashi replied. “Well, if I know they’ll treasure the dog more than me, I might be willing to give it to ‘em. ‘Course, I charge ‘em just to meet the dog in the first place.” Petting the brown, long-haired dog that had come over for attention, Inukashi rubbed their fingers together in the age-old gesture for money.

“How do you know? Do you ask them lots of questions?”

“Well, stuff like that, you know it when you see it,” Inukashi said. “How they look at the dog and take care of it, and how they word things. You can just tell, like,

‘This guy seriously loves this dog,’ or ‘They’re gonna take good care of it,’ and stuff. With someone like that, the dog’ll also feel safe and secure. Dogs are really nervous around folks they don’t like, but with good folks they’re calm and happy from the start. So I ask the dog, ‘D’you wanna become this human’s kid?’ If it’s a *yes* from them, then that’s that.”

“That makes sense,” Shion said.

“Folks who rave about how cute a dog’s face is, or go on about wanting a white one, or one with a curly tail, a pedigree, floppy ears, stuff like that—I turn ‘em all down,” Inukashi continued. “Can’t trust ‘em one bit. The dogs don’t click with them, either. I’ll lend ‘em a dog for a short period, but not for life. I can’t leave a scared dog in their care, anyway.”

“I see…. I get it,” Shion said. “Wow, so you can tell the difference between the good and bad apples, huh?” He was sincerely impressed.

“‘Course I can!” Inukashi said. “I’ve always lived here with dogs. They’re *way* more

smart and thoughtful than humans, so they can always sniff out the truth." A breeze picked up and ruffled Inukashi's hair.

Ever since Shion first met them, Inukashi had lived in the dilapidated remains of a hotel, and even as the surrounding crumbling buildings and barracks were in the process of being rebuilt, Inukashi continued to live there.

"This is a good place, Inukashi," he murmured suddenly.

"Well, obviously; it's a top-class hotel," Inukashi said. "Try forcin' me outta here and I'll bite your throat out and rip it to pieces—got that, Shion?"

Inukashi sounded ready to back up their bark with a bite. Perhaps sensing its master's heightened tension, the brown dog glanced over at Shion—there was a hint of a bite to that, too.

Shion slowly drained his cup of thin black tea.

Even without their intimidating threat,

Shion never had any intention of doing such a thing. “Well, I can’t really imagine you living anywhere else.”

“I don’t *wanna* live anywhere else,” Inukashi shot back. “Oh yeah, haven’t you also left Nezumi’s room untouche…” They promptly shut their mouth. Without opening it again, they looked away.

It had been a long time since Shion had last heard them say Nezumi’s name. This might even have been the first time ever since Nezumi had left. Inukashi’s lips were pressed together as if they regretted letting it slip.

Setting down his cup, Shion nodded. Trying to answer as casually and cheerfully as possible, he said, “Yeah, I’ve left it as it is. I shouldn’t be messing with it without its owner’s permission, after all.” He got to his feet. “Anyway, I should get going. Thanks for the tea.”

“Shion.” Dark eyes looked up at Shion as he stood there. “…You think he’s gonna come back?” Inukashi also stood up. They were wearing a loose-fitting black shirt and

pants that had been stretched out in places. While these were much better than what they used to wear, Inukashi's habit of wearing old worn out clothing hadn't changed, at least.

"You've gotten taller, Inukashi," Shion said.

"Huh?"

"You've gotten taller. You're growing." They were getting taller, and a new roundness to their body had started taking shape. While their arms were thin, there was a soft fleshiness to them, a softness men didn't have.

"Don't change the subject!" Inukashi shouted. The brown dog heaved itself to its feet, and other dogs in the area began to gather round. This wasn't out of the norm, but they were truly well trained. Just one word from Inukashi, and they would attack a human or defend one. They could carry objects and deliver letters. That was the nature of these dogs. "I asked you a question, Shion. I asked you how you feel." Inukashi snapped their fingers, and the

dogs crept closer. “Shion. Are you *actually* waiting for him? Do you seriously believe he’ll come back?”

“Yeah.”

“‘Yeah…?’ You can say that like it’s nothing, huh? No matter how much time passes, you’re still a little airhead. You really haven’t changed one bit.” Inukashi laughed, but not derisively. It was a friendly laugh, full of warmth.

“Don’t you believe he will?” Shion asked.

“Huh? Me?”

“Yeah. Don’t you believe he’ll come back?”

Inukashi’s smile vanished. In its place, two distinct wrinkles appeared between their eyebrows. “Why’re you asking *me* a question like that? What’s it gotta do with me if he comes back or not? Well, if he came back with a hunk of meat and a big sack of gold as souvenirs, then hell, me and my dogs would look forward to it. We’d welcome him with open arms—we’d even treat him to lunch! But that’s never gonna

happen, of course."

"You never know," Shion said. "The gold might be a bit of a stretch, but meat, on the other hand…"

"It's not gonna happen." Inukashi shot down Shion's words, shaking their head of long hair. "There's no way that guy would bring back souvenirs or presents or anything of the sort for me….and not just for me, but for anyone in general. If by some tiny chance he did, I'd take my dogs and get right the hell outta there. There's never been a time when I've accepted something from him and not had it lead me into trouble. Got it, Shion? We've known each other for ages, so I'll give ya some advice." Inukashi raised a finger and wagged it from side to side at Shion. "That guy's tricky and mistrustful, a schemer through and through. He's snake-tongued and a sweet-talker—he can talk you into the palm of his hand like it's his job. He's always been trouble, he's dangerous, and he brings nothing but disaster. Getting involved with a guy like that is like sticking your hand into a viper's nest to

steal its eggs—it's basically suicide, you hear me? Remember that."

"Harsh, aren't you?" Shion held back an unexpected burst of laughter. Inukashi's sharp tongue hadn't changed a bit since they'd met. No, if anything, its edge had only grown keener.

Inukashi snorted. "'Course I am. How much d'you think I've suffered 'cause of that guy? You haven't even heard the half of it!"

"But don't you want to see him?" Shion asked.

"*What*?" Intentionally or otherwise, Inukashi's voice was loud, their words clipped. "What'd you just say? *Who* wants to see *who*?"

"Don't you want to see Nezumi? You do, don't you, Inukashi."

Inukashi gave a full body shudder, like a wet dog shaking off water. "Me? Want to see that *fraud*? That fraud, that swindler, that third-rate actor? Shion…didja finally

crack from overwork? You haven't been hallucinating or anythin', right? I'm not gonna make fun of you, but I think you should quit the Restructural Committee and focus on your health. You'd make Mama Karan sad if anything happened to you."

"Yeah, it's true that I've been a bit worn out lately," Shion agreed. "I've been crazy busy."

"And you're *still* crazy busy," Inukashi said. "Call it quits already, before you start seeing things that ain't there. You could come work for me, yanno? Yeah, I'll hire you to wash dogs just like the good ol' days."

"That's a tempting offer."

That was neither a lie nor a joke. It was the most tempting offer he had received lately, more than any proposal or invitation—it called to his heart.

"Plumbing reaches this far now, and it's easy to get water. You don't gotta go down to the river anymore. Everyone's over the

moon," Inukashi said. "We've got working electricity too, and it's so bright I can't believe it. 'Course, the dogs don't like it if it's too bright, so I use a lamp. Everyone's been so happy 'bout that, too. It's crazy that we can have light at night, and we've even got a proper hospital now, too…I know just how hard you've been working."

"It's not just me who's been working hard," Shion said. "Most of our staff have been working like crazy, and those are the fruits of all that labor. And we still have a ways to go, too—there's so much to do piling up that I can't even see what's in front of me. I'm completely buried in problems I have to solve, and sometimes I feel like putting my head in my hands because I don't even know where to start."

Inukashi snorted again. "What someone *could* do doesn't matter. People have limits, and I can tell you're nearly at yours just by looking at you…"

"So you're worried about me…" Shion said. "Thank you, Inukashi."

"Huh? What gave you *that* idea?"

Inukashi's face scrunched up into a scowl, and they waved their hands around wildly. "No way I'm worried. I'm just telling ya: don't work yourself to death like a dumbass. Working so hard that you're messing yourself up both mentally and physically is *so* stupid. It's so *incredibly* stupid. Ya hear that? You're being a total moron and a baby-brained idiot. There's literally nothing going on in that dumbass head of yours. You're not even fit to be ground into food for my dogs."

"…That's even harsher than what you said about Nezumi."

"Nezumi? He's a fraud and a swindler and a third-rate actor…but he at least knows himself," Inukashi said. "He's such a pain that I'd deck him across the room if I could, but that guy's actually fit for dog food. He knows what he's capable of, and if the odds for somethin' aren't in his favor, he won't do it. He won't ever risk his neck in a fight he knows he's gonna lose—that's why he's *way* better than your sorry state right now."

Oh, so that's how it is. That makes sense. In

his heart, Shion deeply agreed.

Inukashi was right. Nezumi created chances of success. Even if it was only the smallest likelihood, he would create it, and find a foothold to climb past the barrier. He'd make it over even a towering wall there should have been no chance of scaling. Chances of victory, possibility, hope—he created them, brought them forth, and made full use of them. Shion had seen that from closer than than anyone else. Nezumi changed impossibility into possibility, and despair into hope—Shion had witnessed that countless times.

"'…All I did was destroy it, but Shion will make it anew,'" Inukashi murmured.

Shion looked up at Inukashi's words. "Inukashi, what did you just say?"

"Those were Nezumi's last words..." Inukashi said. "Well, not really 'last words.' They weren't just a parting remark, either. Maybe a confession? Nah, that's not quite right. It was just some stupid monologue, really, but anyway—that's what he said to me."

"When?"

"When, huh…probably the day before he left No.6? Or maybe even before that? I don't remember exactly when, but…. Right, I feel like he also said something like 'Creation is a hundred times more difficult than destruction.' Heh, he sure was tryna act all cool."

"Destruction, huh..." Shion mused.

"Yeah. Well, destruction *is* his specialty. He made such a show of taking it down and everything," Inukashi said.

"Yeah, he really did."

After he had destroyed No.6 itself, Nezumi had left.

Shion clenched his fist. "Now I'm feeling really ticked off for some reason."

"Really? It's rare for you to get mad," Inukashi said. "Woah, don't tell me you're mad at *me*?"

"I'm mad at Nezumi," Shion said.

Seriously, who the hell did Nezumi think he was? He just said whatever he wanted, destroyed whatever he wanted, and then left, just like that.

"Shion…Shion." Inukashi grabbed his arm. "Don't make such a scary face. It doesn't suit ya at all. Actually, it looks so bad on ya that I'm tryin' not to laugh. Look, you're scaring even the dogs."

Shion looked around at the hall, the ceiling of which had crumbled half to rubble. The dogs were mostly all sprawled about or playing together; a pile of puppies was curled up into sleeping balls at Shion's feet. "They don't look scared to me."

"They're scared even if they don't look it," Inukashi assured him. "It's 'cause you're pretty laid back that the dogs can feel safe. Being laid back is way better than being scary, if you ask me. And, well…." Inukashi's mouth tightened just a little. "Nezumi could never do what you can."

"Huh?"

"He's someone who destroys things—he

could never build a new world on top of somethin' once-destroyed the way you can. He can struggle all he wants—but he just can't. He's been missing that ability from square one, so there's no way he ever could….or so he said to me, too."

"*Nezumi* said all that...."

"Ah, but, y'know, I seriously gotta agree with him," Inukashi said. "I'm not gonna say you're the most amazing guy ever, but I can say for sure that Nezumi isn't all that special. Not like you are. So don't go breakin' your back working any harder than you already are, got that? And stop being so twisted around that third-rate actor's little finger, already. He's not gonna come back just 'cause you're waiting for him."

Ah, I get it now, Shion realized. *I'm not angry. I'm just annoyed—at myself.*

There wasn't anything he could do but wait, and that helplessness was so overwhelming that he couldn't stand it.

Even so, he still believed in him.

Nezumi did not go back on promises.

Reunion will come, Shion.

Nezumi would never forsake that vow.

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot,” Inukashi said. “Once a month, you go to the park where the Correctional Facility used to be, right? Invite me next time. I’ll bring baby Shion along to play.”

In a corner of the park was a monument modeled after the Correctional Facility’s facade. It had been erected to maintain the memory both of the people who had been taken into the facility and sacrificed, and of what had happened there. On the outside wall were engraved the known names of every single victim. While most had been from the old West Block, there were some names from No.6 mixed in.

Safu’s was one of them. The girl who had been his childhood best friend had met her end with the destruction of the Correctional Facility.

Shion offered flowers to her every month,

and drew motivation from his visits. He motivated himself—so that there would be no more victims, so that the deaths of all those whose names were engraved there, including Safu's, would not be for naught—and continued to think of what he could do, and of what he should do.

"Sounds good, let's do it." At the thought of Safu, there was no way he could have said he was too tired to do so.

Inukashi clicked their tongue. The loud sound rang out, and several dogs perked up their ears. "Listen, we're gonna *hang out*, got that? H-A-N-G O-U-T. We'll do something fun, take it easy, y'know? Geez, if I shouldered burden after burden like you do, I'd stop being able to move pretty quick. I'd get squashed flat by the weight of everythin'. If you're just gonna be hung up over all that complicated stuff, I'm not gonna go with you. It's a pain and zero fun at all. Baby Shion hates it too."

"Fun, huh?"

"Yeah, we gotta have fun," Inukashi said. "Like a picnic or something."

“Ah, that sounds nice. Why don’t I prepare sandwiches?” Shion offered.

“Mama Karan’s, you mean? Don’t you dare say *you’ll* be makin’ them—I don’t want ‘em.”

“That’s a too bad, I wanted to make them myself,” Shion said. “I’ll ask Mom, then. If I tell her I’m going on a picnic with you, I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to make them.”

“Wahoo!” Inukashi exclaimed. “Yay, that’d be awesome. Couldja ask for soft ones so that baby Shion can eat ‘em too? Also, maybe this is askin’ a lot, but I also want one with a thick slice of ham and loads of egg. I’ve always dreamed of eatin’ one.”

“I’ll let her know,” Shion said. “I’m sure she’ll also make some cheese sandwiches, and some with fruit, too. Maybe even some scones, with homemade jam and marmalade.”

“Wow, what a feast! It’s like something’ outta a dream; it all sounds so good that I’m gonna cry. Shion, I’m serious ‘bout all

this, got it? You better not forget that we're goin' on a picnic." Inukashi's eyes shone, and they licked their lips with a light pink tongue.

"Thanks, Inukashi."

"Huh? For what?" they asked. "Oh, I know. If you're bringing Mama Karan's sandwiches, I'll at least bring some water for ya. Top-tier taste, right from the spring."

Shion could tell that Inukashi was inviting him out of concern, and that they were sincerely offering advice and counsel. He wasn't that dense. "I'll let you know the next time I think I can take the day off. Let's nail down our picnic plan soon."

"Got it. Say hi to Mama Karan for me. That pani—pani….what was that thing called?"

"A panini."

"Yeah, that. Make sure to tell her that it was super tasty."

"Roger that," Shion said. "I'll also let her know about your ham and egg sandwich

request.”

“You’re the best,” Inukashi said. “I could even whisper ‘I love ya’ in your ear right now—I’d even smooch you if ya wanted. Me and my dogs’ll lick your whole face clean. For free, of course.”

“Haha, that’s a generous offer, but I think I’ll pass for today,” Shion said. “See you later, Inukashi.”

“Later. I’ll let you hold baby Shion next time.”

“Thanks. Every time I come by there’s always more to look forward to. Bye!”

“See ya.” Inukashi waved their hand lightly, and all the dogs got up to see him off together.

⁂

The promise to have a picnic was still just a promise. Shion hadn’t been able to take time off due to his tremendous workload, but it looked like tomorrow he might be able to take his first break in a long time. The weather also seemed like it might

clear up.

“Why, I’d gladly make Inukashi and Shion the best sandwiches I can, anytime,” Karan had said. “Ah, I mean little Shion, of course. You can just let them know!”

His mother had gladly undertaken that task. Karan loved Inukashi and the child they were raising, and she always asked after them. If Shion asked for some packed lunches for tomorrow, she would prepare them with enthusiasm.

Even so….

He stared at the window, its glassy surface covered in water droplets, where he could see himself faintly reflected.

Someone skilled with a knife, huh.

Someone was out there, wielding a knife as they pleased, using it to cut short human lives. A killer like that being on the loose was certainly dangerous. He wasn’t inclined to interfere with Security Bureau business, but he at least wanted to know the investigation results.

But why was this happening?

Doubts passed through his head.

Two years ago, there had been a thankfully temporary period of near anarchy when security infrastructure had collapsed. Amidst the chaos, people had lost sight of their foundations, their sense of right and wrong, their sense of order, and their principles. When the land grew turbulent, so too did the hearts of its people. Then, when people's hearts returned to calm, so too did the land’s devastation.

As order returned, the crime rate had also rapidly lessened. Even so, it never completely dropped to zero, of course. People would still be killed or wounded on occasion, and some still took their own lives. Thieves still caused disturbances. Small skirmishes and arguments would often arise between former No.6 and former West Block residents.

The incident that Ruka had reported, however, was distinctly out of the

ordinary. Someone was killing people with clear malicious intent, not to mention that any connection between the victims had yet to be found. Differences between gender, place of residence, and age seemed to be irrelevant. They had been indiscriminate murders, in other words. Wielding a lethal knife, someone was out there murdering people at random.

Or, perhaps, there *was* a point of connection between the victims.

Shion lightly pressed his fingers to the window's special glass.

Was there something that connected the three victims? Something the Security Bureau hadn't rooted out yet? More important than anything, was nipping any more potential harm in the bud. There could not be any more victims.

Drops of water slid down the glass. One found another, and combined into a single large droplet. Accelerating with the added weight, it soon splashed against the

window frame and disappeared. It reminded Shion of a river pouring into the sea.

"A knife, huh," he tried saying aloud.

Perhaps it was because the rain clouds had started to thin, but the view outside the window had grown a little brighter.

⁂

Kicking off on his bicycle, Shion sped due west through the Forest Park.

On summer evenings, one would see large numbers of people strolling or hurrying home, but after the storm, when the sun had sunk below the horizon, there was no one out but him. The birds that made the trees their homes were peacefully quiet, not uttering a single cry. Lamps lining the street lit it up in equal intervals, making the darkness's depths stand out even more.

To the west of the park was the small neighborhood known as Lost Town.

There, his mother Karan ran a little bakery. She sold a variety of bread, muffins, scones and other baked goods, and sometimes even cherry cake and quiche, all lined up in the shop’s display.

It wasn't a big shop, so its daily profits were never anything to boast about. Despite that, it was a job that took considerable work and physical labor. Karan continued to bake bread nonetheless, taking only one day off a week.

Even back then, on *that* day, the very day No.6 had fallen—Karan had baked bread, arranged it in the case, and handed it out to people.

"What an illustrious mother you have." Nezumi's murmur of admiration had overlapped with the delicious smell of bread, and Shion distinctly recalled feeling slightly like he was floating.

Seven days later, Nezumi had left Shion's side and was gone.

Though their first meeting had been unexpected, their parting had left behind words of promise.

Reunion will come, Shion.

That vow was yet unfulfilled.

In the wake of the storm, great gust of wind blew intermittently. Passing through the park, Shion arrived at Lost Town. The paved road was wet with rain, and even the depths of the darkness gleamed with light. He just needed to turn off the main road, head up a small street along a hill, and then he'd be home.

Ah, hold on. Perhaps he ought to buy some ham and eggs first before heading back. Maybe he'd get some fruit that baby Shion could eat, too.

A thought suddenly occurred to him. At the bottom of the hill was a small grocery store, and while their selection was nothing to write home about, there was no

question of its quality.

Ham, eggs, and fruit. He'd buy them, then go home.

He slowed down his bike, and at the same time, a chill ran down his spine.

An alarm rang in his eardrums.

Danger, danger, danger.

He slammed on the brake. His front wheel rammed into something, and his bicycle jolted violently.

"Shit!" He lost his balance and tumbled to the road, the bicycle falling flat behind him. He'd slowed down just in time to brace himself, and narrowly avoided smashing full force into the ground. Even so, his whole body went briefly numb. "Ouch..."

All the same, he sat up immediately. The alarm bells in his head wouldn't stop ringing.

Danger, danger, danger.

The ability to sense danger, the intuition to swiftly predict how to move—he had cultivated those instincts at Nezumi's side. They were more than sufficient when it came to real combat.

Run? No, hold on, there's no need to be hasty.

Shion stood up, and slowly took a step forward.

What was the impact from earlier?

It wasn't that his tires had slipped from braking abruptly. The wheel had stopped moving without warning—something had stopped it. Was there an obstruction? What would be in the middle of the road...?

Right before falling over, it had seemed to him like a black line had materialized in front of the bicycle light.

Shion took a pen light from his pocket and shone it around the bicycle.

He held his breath—at about knee-height, he could see a black line.

It was a steel wire. That was what had caught him—no wonder he had fallen over.

No wonder? No, it was certainly something to wonder about. A steel wire bisecting a road like this was completely out of the ordinary. He was glad he to have held himself back, since if he had run for fear in that direction, his feet would have gotten caught. He would have fallen over again, and he might not been so lucky that time.

He shivered.

Who had put this here, and why?

The road was narrow, and could only be passed through by pedestrians and bicyclists. The municipal road extended from the park's west entrance, and connected to the main street. There were many pedestrians and street-lamps there. As it was the longer route home, though,

Shion always used a nearby back alley.

In that very alley, someone had set a tripwire—at the perfect height to catch a bicycle tire.

It couldn't be written off as a simple prank.

No, there was no way this was just a prank. This…was a *trap*.

Run, Shion. Get out of there.

A voice more powerful than alarm bells resounded clearly in his mind.

That voice had led him away from danger countless times, and had rescued him from the jaws of death itself.

Run. Quickly!

Gripping the pen light, he tried to break into a sprint. The moment before he could, he was yanked strongly from behind, and in that instant, a piercing awareness of *something* ran through his body.

It was killing intent.

Shion staggered and leapt to the side.

"Ah!" Pain ran up the base of his arm. More than pain, though, he felt heat. It burned at him.

His legs tangled, and his back hit the wall. The wall belonged to the building of what used to be a restaurant, once owned by an elderly couple. Even after all the chaos had died down, they hadn't come back, leaving it in its current empty condition—which meant that no matter how much noise he made, no one would notice.

"Tch...." He felt his arm with his other hand. He smelled blood—his palm was wet and slippery with it.

“Well, well, aren’t you quick?” came a muffled voice. A shadow moved.

No, it wasn’t a shadow, but a person dressed completely in black. A man, as far as he could tell, broad-shouldered, with half of his face covered by a black mask. He was gripping a knife in his right hand.

Even in the darkness, the sharp blade glinted brightly in Shion's eyes.

It was a double-edged dagger, typical for use in combat.

"My, to think you'd dodge my knife. Nicely done, Board Chairman."

There was no chance to ask who the hell he was. The knife slashed diagonally downward—he was clearly aiming for the throat. Shion dropped down in a flash, the attack barely missing the top of his head, and he heard a sharp whoosh—the sound of the blade slicing through air.

"Wha—" came the man's confused voice. He clearly hadn't expected Shion to avoid the strike at all.

Too slow.

Compared to Nezumi, the man's moves were measurably slow. Shion could see openings everywhere.

Don't you underestimate me. I didn't escape the jaws of death for show.

Shion rose back up, and kicked the man's wrist as hard as he could. The knife went flying, falling to the flooded road with a clatter. Shion sprang to his feet and started running. If he could just get through the alley, then he could somehow escape this situation.

"Shit—" All of a sudden, something tripped him up. At the sensation, he pitched forward. Miraculously, he stayed on his feet, but his body was thrown completely off balance, and he collided once more into a wall.

There had been another tripwire.

"You were pretty fun prey to hunt…but it's all over now."

The shadow loomed over him.

Down flashed the knife.

Chapter 2: A Humble Wish

"Get me a taper in my study, Lucius.
When it is lighted, come and call me here."
- *Julius Caesar*, Act II Scene 1, by William Shakespeare

⁂

It was raining that day, so they couldn't wash the dogs, and they couldn't take baby Shion out for a walk, either.

Inukashi let out a small sigh.

The second floor of the ruined hotel was well-built, so even in a raging storm, it could weather the wind and rain just fine. It was here in a spacious room that Inukashi and baby Shion lived, right by the stairs down to the first floor.

Little Shion could already walk on his own. He could even run a short distance on shaky little feet—and in a straight line, to boot! It felt almost unbelievable that only a little while ago, all he could do was toddle around unsteadily. He could even chew and swallow his own food without needing

Inukashi to mash it or grate it down. Just the other day—well, over three months ago, really—they had consulted with Mama Karan about him.

“Now, Inukashi, children of Shion’s age can easily get food stuck in their throat. That’s why we keep a careful eye on them until they’re done eating,” she had said. From then on, whenever it came time for him to eat, Inukashi made sure never to look away from him even once. The beings known as humans were truly such a pain sometimes. With dogs, once they were weaned, they could be left alone. They were quick studies on what was edible and what wasn’t, what could be food and what couldn’t, how to avoid starving, and how to withstand the pangs of hunger. They watched the behavior of the adults in their pack, learned from it, reenacted it, and remembered it. They were far less time-consuming than humans, who had to be taught every last little thing. In fact, humans were *too* time-consuming—they were a complete pain.

All the same, Inukashi was glad to have

Shion.

For some reason, with him around, their heart felt warm and fuzzy. Be it *bliss*, or perhaps *contentment*—whether this feeling went by a different name was beyond them. Regardless, it was a nice feeling, light and airy. While a constant feeling of annoyance regularly plagued them, it was this fuzzy feeling that won out.

Baby Shion wasn't as tough as a dog, and wouldn't do Inukashi the favor of growing up as quickly as one, either. It had already been two years since he had been brought to them, but he still needed a guardian. He couldn't survive without someone to defend his life.

So defend him they would, with all their might.

Inukashi had been raised in the West Block, and had probably been born there as well. As far back as they could remember, they never had anyone that they could call a parent; it seemed they had been an orphan. Even the old man who had picked up Inukashi as a crying

infant wrapped in dirty rags had left them behind, in the end.

People would always leave, but Inukashi had their dogs—and dogs would always stay by their side.

Inukashi had suckled on dogs' milk, eaten what dogs ate, and lived together with them. Gramps taught them words and the alphabet, as well as how to read books and write letters, and Inukashi understood now that he had been cultivating their ability to make it out in the world on their own. They also understood that once he had ensured they could survive, he had disappeared.

Inukashi never knew why he had left. They didn't wonder about what the reason could have been, or entertain fancies of searching for him, or other pointless things. All that was just a waste of time.

Most things in this world weren't worth bothering with. Life was littered with things that were neither a hindrance nor a help to them, and would continue to be as long as they yet lived. They considered the

reason Gramps had disappeared to be just one such thing. To them, it was all the same.

Even so, they still sometimes thought of Gramps, who was probably six feet under by now, and uttered a thank you to him within their heart. It was Inukashi's way of holding a memorial service, and to them, it was more than enough.

As long as they had their dogs, they didn't need people or anything else, and their life wouldn't be inconvenienced by their absence. And yet, in the midst of all that, little Shion had suddenly appeared. There was no way Inukashi could have ever seen it coming—they had been caught completely by surprise, thoroughly bewildered, and deeply perturbed, too.

Hey, Shion, what the hell am I supposed to do with this kid?

Inukashi often held the baby and howled that question up at the sky.

They already had their hands full caring for dozens of puppies. Raising a human

baby was a first for them, and they had no idea what the hell they were supposed to do—it called to mind the utter helplessness of being thrown out naked into the dark. Even now, sometimes, they felt terrified beyond all measure.

Despite all their fear, though, they'd much rather just shake it off. Inukashi would protect little Shion with all their might, no matter what happened. They would not let his life be stolen away, whether by illness or injury or anything else. If one were to ask them why they were so driven to do this, they wouldn't be able to give an answer. In fact, the one most baffled by that drive was Inukashi themself.

Little Shion was the baby that Shion had entrusted them with on the day of the Manhunt. They had heard that the child's mother had been carried off to the Correctional Facility during the hunt, and that in the marketplace that had been reduced to rubble, she had cried out for someone to please, at the very least, save her child.

It didn't matter to Inukashi whose kid he

was. *Right now, I'm the one raising Shion. He has no other guardian but me.*

They took that charge seriously, and for them, that was reason enough—nothing worth losing sleep over. They had managed to raise him just fine, so far. Sometimes it was with frustration, and sometimes it was with joy, but they cared for him all the same. That was Inukashi's reality.

Little Shion was a tough kid, and rarely got sick. He ate well, laughed well, moved well, and slept well. The dogs constantly bathed him with their tongues, so he was kept free from rashes or other skin conditions.

Mama Karan had sung their praises, exclaiming, "Why, Inukashi, you're wonderful with childcare! It's not often one meets such an energetic, sweet, and happy child!"

Her words hadn't been just lip-service, but sincere admiration, straight from the heart. Inukashi knew a real compliment when they heard one. It had a pleasant scent,

and didn't give off a sour, nasty odor the way insincere, empty words did.

That's right—just like Mama Karan said, I'm doing a good job raising baby Shion. So then, why did that happen…?

⁂

Three days ago, on a swelteringly humid day where the sky was covered in thick clouds, an old woman had come by Inukashi's place. It had been an early afternoon so uncomfortable it felt like the height of summer again. She had worn a pale blue dress and carried a parasol of the same color, and while her white hair wasn't as beautiful as Shion's, it was still lovely, and framed her face with soft curls the length of her round cheeks.

Everything about her, from her dress and parasol to her tidy hairstyle, had reeked of

suspicion.

Inukashi had never had a run-in with someone like her before. How would you even describe someone like this? Exquisite? Sweet? Gentle? To them, she had the air of a fine dog, pampered by an affluent owner, who had been given the proper amount of nutrition and fed the right amount of food, and who could go her whole life without suffering the cold or heat. She might even have had a pedigree.

Yep, she *reeked*.

Inukashi unconsciously furrowed their eyebrows.

“Good afternoon,” the woman said. She closed her parasol and smiled at them.

At the time, they had been taking care of their large dogs afflicted by skin issues, carefully shearing their fur, washing the affected areas, and then applying medicine. Shion had given Inukashi the medicine, and the scissors were a pair of old sewing shears passed along by Mama Karan.

“Inukashi,” Karan had said. “You saved Shion’s life, and I can’t possibly thank you enough for that. But please, never think I bring you bread and essentials just because my son owes you his life. That’s not the only reason.” Mama Karan’s shoulders had dropped. “I love you, Inukashi. You and Nezumi, I love you both, so much that I want to do everything I can for you. I couldn’t do anything for Nezumi, but I feel like I can do something for you.” Her shoulders had fallen again. “No matter what bold words I say, though, all I’m capable of is sharing my bread with you. You’re already standing steady on your own two feet, and you’re even raising a child. There’s not all that much I can do to help you.”

“You do plenty for me,” Inukashi had replied. Their mouth had tightened and they had looked away.

It had made them happy. It had made them so happy that Mama Karan said she loved them. Kindness without a whiff of a lie was a precious treasure they rarely had the privilege of receiving. To them, it was

worth far more than even a whole sackful of gold coins.

I love you too, Mama Karan, Inukashi had longed to reply casually, but all they had been able to do was look to the side in silence, deeply bashful.

Inukashi loved Mama Karan. She had a lot more pluck to her than she seemed. She never said anything more than she needed to, and she neither lectured nor imposed. She would lend a helping hand without ever meddling. She baked extraordinarily delicious bread, and visited them once a week on the pretense of bringing it fresh. Sometimes…she would even give them a hug, enfolding them with arms that smelled of bread right out of the oven.

They loved Mama Karan, and, well? Her son wasn't so bad either.

Inukashi's first impression of Shion had been that he was a strange kid—he had reeked of No.6's awful stench, and, despite his youth, had pure white hair. He had been oblivious, and unaware that strangers were to be distrusted, and despite having

only just met them, he had reached out for a handshake like it was perfectly natural. He hadn't known how to fight, and hadn't had a single tool to do so with.

Shion had been naive, and weak, and had known nothing of the world. Inukashi hadn't thought he'd make it three days in the West Block. The next time they saw him—if there was to be a next time—surely they'd be seeing Shion's *corpse*. They was sure of it! They didn't think that to be just a mere possibility—they practically expected it.

Inukashi's expectations, however, had been splendidly subverted. Shion had survived, and not just for three days, but all the way to the new world that followed No.6's ruin.

Was it because Nezumi had been there? Had Shion evaded death because Nezumi had been by his side? The answer was yes, no doubt about it—it was thanks to Nezumi that Shion had made it through with his life intact. The opposite, though, had been true as well. Just as Nezumi himself had said, Shion was the one who had protected Nezumi and saved his life.

Those two just didn't make any sense. Inexplicably, Inukashi found themself heaving a sigh.

Two years ago, when they had heard that Nezumi was living with some white-haired airhead, to say that they had been surprised would be an understatement—Inukashi's jaw had practically hit the floor. Shion's presence in Nezumi's life wasn't just a tasteless joke or a blatant lie that had been exposed; it was reality, and one that Inukashi couldn't believe.

At the time, they hadn't had Nezumi completely figured out, though it wasn't much different these days, either—they *still* didn't have him figured out. Nezumi's innate disposition, Nezumi's true colors—they were all still a mystery to them. That didn't bother Inukashi in the slightest, of course. They had no desire to know Nezumi any better, nor grow any closer to him. In fact, if the two of them could go the rest of their lives without seeing each other again, Inukashi would be glad of it.

The one thing they knew for certain was

that Nezumi was the kind of person who never got close to anyone, no matter who they were. Nezumi had always been a lone wolf, and Inukashi had never even seen him out and about with someone. Not even once! Even with the sensitive nose they had, they had never caught the scent or any other hint of another person on him.

Once they had gotten over their initial shock and came to make Shion's acquaintance, however, the fact of the matter was that, oddly enough, they actually found him to be a decent guy. They couldn't explain just what it was about him that made them feel that way, but whatever—Shion was alright.

Perhaps it was since Inukashi had grown used to seeing Nezumi and Shion go about together, but at some point, Shion no longer felt so out-of-place to them…. In fact, to their eyes, Nezumi and Shion fit together like a hand in a glove—that they had gone their separate ways after the fall of No.6 was difficult to reconcile.

Inukashi had no idea where Nezumi had gone off to, nor what he was up to now. He

was probably alive, at least. Perhaps if he'd been a sweet, harmless little guy liable to kick the bucket at any moment, they would have been more inclined to befriend him. Nezumi, insolent and stubborn, was instead more cautious than a vixen with kits—he was well aware of how to survive, in other words. He had sufficient ability to do so—more than sufficient, really. He was still alive out there somewhere, make no mistake. Shion, however….

It wasn't as if Inukashi met up with him on the regular. Be that as it may, once or twice a month, Mama Karan would invite Inukashi to dinner. Sometimes, they would call on Shion to help with washing dogs, or he would unexpectedly drop by.

Hey, you okay? Every time they met, Inukashi would worry. They knew they didn't need to worry about anyone except for baby Shion and the dogs, and they knew Shion's life wasn't under threat from all sides, but even so, they always found themself wanting to ask him, *hey, you okay?* They had felt that way when Shion had recently dropped by as well, come to

deliver the pani-something? Pri-something? Whatever that bread thing had been.

Watching Shion hand over the bag of bread with a smile, Inukashi had held their breath and swallowed down the words, *hey, you okay?*

Even that much was dangerous.

From the outside, Shion looked the same as ever. He hadn't changed much at all—his hair was still white, but it was lustrous and beautiful, and it gleamed silver when the light struck it. His cheeks had grown somewhat gaunt, but he wasn't excessively thin. Whenever they met, he greeted Inukashi with a warm smile.

He hadn't changed a bit, and yet, he had changed completely.

Back when Shion had been in the West Block, he had lived in peril. This was a given, of course—he knew no method of protecting himself, nor how to fight. Perhaps he no longer needed to know such things, though. Shion was now at the head

of No.6, and personal safety measures came with the territory. Shion himself had become plenty strong, in any case. Even beyond that, his fighting abilities might be much stronger than they seemed—though Inukashi hadn't personally seen the extent of them, even Nezumi had once appeared caught off-guard.

That's right—*Nezumi* had been caught off-guard. Even he hadn't managed to come to grips with what lay hidden within Shion… and beneath that bewilderment, there was a chance, perhaps—the slightest chance!—that fear lurked. They had never before, nor ever again, seen Nezumi wear the expression he had made in that moment.

Bewilderment and fear—Inukashi hadn't missed the flash of emotion that had passed through those deep grey eyes.

Of course, it was no matter whether or not they had caught it, as it neither helped nor harmed them. As such, it had slipped their mind since then. The walls dividing No.6 and the West Block had come tumbling down, and No.6 itself had been undergoing great transformation. As those days of

intertwined destruction and rebirth continued on, Inukashi, hands full with their dogs and little Shion, had been expending all their energy on keeping their head above water. There was nothing for them to gain or lose by troubling themself with a matter they didn't have the resources to deal with.

Recently, however, Inukashi found themself remembering Nezumi's eyes and the profile of his face. In fact, he appeared in their mind or flashed across the backs of their eyes quite often—they found it terribly annoying.

What the hell are ya doing, Nezumi? Your Shion ain't doing too hot, y'know? Inukashi growled at him in their mind, biting back annoyance. *He's really going through it, okay? I've already got my hands full with my own Shion, so you do somethin' about yours!*

Inukashi ran their fingers through their hair, scratching their head. They bathed alongside their dogs whenever they washed them, so they had never had lice or anything, nor did they have acne or scratches. Nevertheless, they felt a

throbbing ache—not on their scalp, but within their body.

The ache was anxiety. Every time they looked at the older Shion, Inukashi found themself aching with it.

He looks so fragile and vulnerable, and like he could snap in two at any moment.… Ugh, it's not like it's my problem, though. Whatever happens to Shion has nothin' to do with me. If he shatters or falls apart, it ain't none of my business! So do something, Nezumi! You're the only one who can…don't ya know that?

Though they didn't particularly want to sigh, they found themself doing so all the same. Squatting down, they sighed once more. Beside them, the old dog licked their cheeks as if to comfort them.

⁂

Three days ago, when the old lady had come by, Inukashi had also been thinking about Shion as they cared for their dogs beneath the cloudy sky. They hadn't met up with him since the two of them had exchanged the promise to go on a picnic,

and, well, that was that—if it didn't work out, then it just didn't work out. It wasn't as though they particularly *wanted* to go on a picnic with Shion; it was just that the thought of putting baby Shion in a stroller and having a relaxing lunch in the gentle breeze had seemed so wonderful. Mama Karan's sandwiches for lunch would have been the icing on the cake—Inukashi couldn't have asked for anything else!

Shion, whom they had come to know so well, didn't make half-baked promises—he would never go back on a vow once he'd made it. That was simply his way, and Inukashi knew it for a fact. Shion had later sent a short letter saying, "I'll have to postpone our picnic plans, but I haven't forgotten about them!" That had been the last time they had heard anything from him.

Shion sure was busy.

Dipping a fingertip into the light green salve, Inukashi rubbed it into the dog's inflamed skin. It was extremely effective medicine, and the red lesions inflamed with heat were already almost half-healed.

“Good afternoon,” greeted the old woman again, smiling and closing her parasol.

She’s carrying a parasol even on such a cloudy day, thought Inukashi briefly.

“Why, how old are you?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Your age, I mean,” she clarified. “Now, how old might you be? Twelve? Thirteen?”

Age? Who gives a shit? So what if I’m twelve or thirteen or sixty or ninety-five? Inukashi’s face twisted into a scowl.

The smile remained on the old woman’s face—it seemed like she was accustomed to not getting any response. “Where might your mother or father be?”

Mother? Like Inukashi’s mom? Well, if that was what she was asking about, then…. “Died a long time ago.”

Their mom had been a large dog, calm and kind, with thick fur. She had fed them her own milk, and let them sleep nestled close

against her belly to ward off the cold.

“Oh dear…is that so?” the old lady said. “M-my apologies. That was thoughtless of me. I’m terribly sorry for asking something so insensitive….” She was overly flustered, and apologized countless times.

Inukashi had no clue what had been so insensitive, or what she was even apologizing for, but they could at least assume she wasn’t here to borrow a dog. If that was the case, then they didn’t need her around.

Gathering up the scissors and medicine, Inukashi got to their feet. They decided to ignore her no matter what she said—they had no time to waste on the random babbling of someone who was neither a customer nor an acquaintance.

“Mama? Where Mama?” Little Shion had been sleeping inside the baby carriage, but it seemed he had woken up. Inukashi had dug the carriage out from the rubble—it was a lot sturdier than it looked, and in pretty good shape aside from a broken handle. They had been able to put it to use

immediately after a few repairs. With its girth distributed across a squarish frame evidently handmade by an amateur, it really was nothing more than a box on four wheels, but it sure was convenient. They had installed a new handle and spread some ratty cloth on the bottom, and it also doubled as a crib for Shion. On cold days, he slept inside it with some small dogs, and they kept him warm—just like how Inukashi's mom had kept Inukashi warm.

The old woman spoke up again. "Oh my, is that a baby you have there? Oh, goodness me!" A smile broke out on her face, and she began to walk in the direction of the baby carriage.

"Stay away!" Inukashi yelled. They picked up Shion and took a step backwards. The dogs all around them stood up in unison—that alone should have been intimidating enough to make the average person flee in fear.

"Come now, there's no need to be so cautious," she cooed. "My word, he's positively adorable! He is a boy, yes? How old is he? About two, perhaps?"

Again with the age question. What was up with this lady and her investment in people's ages?

"Is he your little brother? Do you live together?" she continued. "Oh dear, of course I'll bring some treats for you next time. Forgive me for not having any right now!" The lady, smiling, had started talking to a dog. Seemed like she wasn't the average person, after all.

"He's not twenty yet," said Inukashi.

"Excuse me?"

"His age. You asked for it." Inukashi rocked Shion gently, and perhaps sensing something, he gripped onto them with his tiny hands. They caught a whiff of the smell children's hair had when dry—the scent of sunshine.

It's alright, don't you worry. No matter what happens, I'll protect you if it's the last thing I do, they thought.

"Well, I never!" said the old lady, bursting into laughter. "That's for certain! No

matter how you look at him, he's surely under twenty! Haha, what a remarkable sense of humor you have." She continued laughing gaily for a while.

Inukashi hadn't meant it as a joke—they weren't nearly sociable enough to joke around with a stranger, nor were they careless enough.

Dogs came of age after two years, but Shion was nowhere close to that—he still needed to be looked after. He was much younger than the age of majority at twenty. All Inukashi had done was inform the old woman of that, so why had she laughed?

And why the hell did I answer? I'm supposed to be ignoring her.

They had been caught up in her rhythm. The feeling of caution within them only grew stronger—the feeling that this mirthful, good-natured granny might in fact be a sly old fox.

The old woman's gaze shifted from Shion to Inukashi. "My dear, you aren't enrolled

in school, are you?"

"'School?'"

"Yes, school," she said."There are many children just like you and your brother here in the former West Block—children who have lost their parents, with no adults to look after them. We watch over such children in their parents' stead, and ensure you can live proper lives. We make sure you have the opportunity to go to school as well, of course. We maintain a place for that purpose—without somewhere like it, your lives would be in danger. And indeed, children sometimes lose their lives…. We want to save children like you. We want to do *something*."

The hell? What was this lady rattling on about? Inukashi knew about all that shit already.

It had always been like that. Since way before the walls came down, countless children had lost their guardians and been thrown out with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Maybe three in ten…no, *two* for every ten of them would get lucky and

survive. Inukashi had been one of them.

When day-to-day safety was under threat, whether from natural disaster or human hands, the weakest links were always the first to break—meaning children, women, the elderly, and the sick…. Inukashi had seen plenty of half-dead kids, and children's corpses, too. Adults might separate death into different little categories—death by starvation, by hypothermia, by illness, and so on. But what was even the point of that?

When it came down to it, after all, they had all been murdered. The many children who drew their last breaths in the West Block had, for the most part, been murdered…by No.6.

No.6 had created the reality that was the hell outside the walls, a reality where you could barely survive without someone watching your back—hell, you could barely survive even if you did have someone. No.6 had created it, and in it, killed people mercilessly, whether through starving them, letting them freeze to death, leaving them to die of disease, or other

such evils.

Then, as if that weren't enough, No.6 had gone as far as making them victims of the Manhunt. That event was no natural disaster. It was indisputably murder—no, *massacre*—carried out by human hands.

How many babies and tiny kids do you think I've buried up 'til now? The bodies of those who died on the side of the road, or under rubble, or at the bottom of a ditch or in the bushes, all of 'em so light you could lift 'em easily with a single hand—how many of 'em do you think I've buried? Countless times I've dug up the ground for 'em, opened up holes, piled dirt on, given 'em small rocks in place of headstones, and yet, did any of you ever pay your respects in front of even a single one of their endless graves? Did you leave them flowers? Did you pray? Did you beg for forgiveness?

Inukashi sometimes felt so angry it made their hair stand on end.

You treated us like insects. You crushed us beneath your feet with a smile. You never ever saw us as fellow people who were just the

same as you. You didn't even stop to think that we might be flesh and blood, that we might have hearts beating in our chests.

Ain't that what makes you No.6?

"Save?" "We want to do something?"

Bullshit. Bullshit. Bullshit.

For a moment, they wanted to rip the old woman apart with their teeth. The flesh, the veins and arteries, the muscles of this person who wore the stink of No.6 like a cloak—Inukashi wanted to bite into her and tear her into a thousand pieces.

Inukashi.

Someone called their name. Who was it? Their mom? Shion? Mama Karan?

Inukashi bit their lip and looked down.

They *despised* No.6, bearing within them a terrible, vicious loathing. That hatred, a constant ache deep inside their chest, had suddenly reared its head and roared.

Even if the walls were gone, the hearts of

the people remained. Inukashi couldn't believe that anyone who had suffered such cruelty could forgive the ones that had forced it upon them. Even so....

I like Shion and Mama Karan.... I love 'em, even. Both of 'em are from No.6, but I don't have it in me to hate 'em. Shion makes me worry over him, and I feel so happy when Mama Karan hugs me. There's no way I could ever hate either of 'em. Even that lil' girl I run into sometimes at Mama Karan's bakery—Lili, or somethin'? I mean, I can't hate her, either, and she's so sweet with lil' Shion.

Just the other day, a shy Lili had asked if she could kiss little Shion's forehead. She had beamed with such delight when Inukashi had told her to go for it. It was rare to see a face lit with such joy—she had almost looked as if she were glowing with it. Her face had been one without a whit of evil or malice, and she had been so adorable when she had brushed her lips against little Shion's forehead.

Inukashi had heard that Lili had a little sister even younger than baby Shion. She had told them that her papa left for work

and never came home, so there was no mistaking that he'd gotten caught up in the chaos and kicked it somewhere. To have left behind a family must have caused him great regret in his death.

Inukashi didn't say it aloud, but their heart went out to Lili. Ever since Lili had conveyed to them her love and admiration for her father, they could tell that she still held onto hope that he might someday come home.

Apparently Lili's little sister had the same name as her father, or so they'd heard. They didn't care about other people's business at all, though, so they hadn't asked what that name was.

"Mama picked it," Lili had said. "It's both a girl *and* a boy name!"

In other words, Lili's mother had already resigned herself to the fact that her husband would never come home again—she had discarded all her hope. A mother in those kinds of circumstances, they thought, was also truly hapless.

For that family, Inukashi felt not hatred, but compassion.

That's right, they thought. *It's not like I hate everyone in No.6. But…but then, if that's the case, then who am I supposed to hate? What do I smash to pieces with all this anger?*

Trapped with nowhere to go, their angry outburst and their animosity lost steam in turn, falling still once more within the depths of their chest.

The feeling wasn't fading away, nor was it growing smaller—it was just just falling quiet and biding its time.

"I know," said the old woman in a muted, hoarse voice. "I know just what we did to you. Not the full extent of it…but I know."

Inukashi looked up, and their gazes met. The old woman's eyes were a deep black—she had the same eyes as Mama Karan.

"I also know that no amount of apologizing will ever earn forgiveness," she continued, "but will you listen? My daughter, her partner, and my grandchild, too, all lost

their lives. They were killed…by No.6."

Inukashi held their breath. They clutched Shion close—perhaps a little too tightly, as he started to squirm and fuss.

"I lived my whole life within the walls, so I can't say I'm the same as you," she said. "But…but it's precisely because of that that I want to do something—at least for the sake of the children who are still alive…."

Still holding Shion, Inukashi took another step backwards. It felt to them like they *had* to put some distance between themself and the old woman. They asked, "And what does that have to do with school or whatever?"

"You can learn," the old lady said. She didn't avert her eyes from their face. "You can learn how to read books and play instruments, how to write and do math. You can learn about your civil rights and duties. And then…then, you can have discussions and debates with others, and put your feelings and opinions into words. You can learn to master all those skills."

“As if I need bullshit like that,” Inukashi spat. *So it’s just lining up and studying with everyone in a neat little row. Don’t make me laugh. That shit won’t fill an empty stomach.*

“You do,” she insisted. “It’s crucial.”

“I *don’t*. Crucial for what?”

“Crucial for not making the same mistakes…. Crucial for not bringing forth another No.6.”

“I can’t make heads or tails of what you’re sayin’,” Inukashi said. “Are ya goin’ senile, granny?”

“No, I’m not,” she said. “Through acquiring knowledge, we nurture true wisdom—wisdom that will make it so a false holy city will never be permitted to take shape again. Wisdom is essential for creating a world in which the powerful minority do not victimize the many, and where the many do not meet with misfortune and cannot be abused.” The old woman spoke seriously, with a grave expression.

Inukashi sneered. “Bullshit. That’s rich,

comin' from you! At that school or whatever, ya gotta swear loyalty to the holy city, don't ya? I know *all* about it. Every morning at school, you people have that so-called 'Loyalty to the City Oath Ceremony.' Ya get up and say 'I swear my unwavering loyalty to the city' or somethin'. I heard about a guy who refused to do it and got arrested—heard all about what *happened* to 'im, too. '*Crucial*?' Tch, what's crucial about any of that shit? Don't make me laugh. You're just turnin' people into tools for some bigshot to control. That's a hard pass from me. I ain't steppin' one foot inside that place no matter how much you ask."

The old woman's tense face twisted, the corners of her mouth pulling down into a frown. Internally, Inukashi clicked their tongue, wondering if she was about to cry.

"No, it's nothing like that." In an insistent denial, the old woman shook her head from side to side, her white hair fluttering about her face. "Our school isn't like that, and there will *never* be another school like that. Ours is a place where we don't swear

loyalty, but instead that we will treat people, ourselves, and others well."

The old woman didn't cry—rather, Inukashi could see something almost like anger in the corners of her eyes.

"And—and, well!" she said. "Setting you aside for the moment, what about that baby?"

Shion? Inukashi thought. *What does he have to do with this?*

"Things aren't like they used to be in the West Block anymore," she explained. "This place is becoming something new, and from now on, there will be all kinds of opportunities that weren't possible before. People can become who they want to become, and do the things they want to do. *Those* are the kinds of opportunities I mean. You can choose your own occupation—you could become an engineer, or a doctor, or open a restaurant or even a flower shop. You could start a business, or work towards becoming a scholar. You can do whatever you like—music, sports, the arts, anything and

everything! The first step to all that, however, is *knowledge*. You will need knowledge, and you will need experience, and that's what school is there for. When that baby grows up and starts thinking about what he wants to do, our school will be there to help him achieve that. It's a place for each and every individual, and it will be crucial for his future. At least, I believe as much."

Inukashi's mouth was shut tightly. They didn't say anything to that—or rather, they *couldn't*.

"My dear," she said. "Even if you don't want to go, what about the child, at least? Might you entrust him to us? Should he ever fall ill, we can get him to a doctor immediately. While it's nothing fancy, he'll be able to eat three meals a day and sleep in a clean bed. He can go to school, learn, and make friends. He might even meet people he can talk to about his dreams and share his future with. Don't you think that's wonderful? And of course, he could be with you, too, if you came along."

"Fuck off!" Inukashi yelled. They had

caught onto the real trap here. That's simply how it was—reality was always littered with traps, laid down so deftly and cold-heartedly, and they lay hidden in wait.

They were going to take Shion from Inukashi. They were going to force him from their hands.

"Get the hell outta here, and don't ever come back!" Inukashi shouted. "If ya show your face around here one more time, I'm not gonna hold back!" The dog sitting by their side sprang up and gave a low growl —one meant to intimidate.

Unsurprisingly, the old woman shrunk back. "I understand. I'm terribly sorry for springing this on you out of nowhere—of course you'd be surprised. Say, won't you give this a read?"

The old woman held out a flyer to them.

Inukashi didn't take it.

"Ah, by the way, my name is Shuri," she continued. "Shuri. It's written at the

bottom of the flyer. You can read, can't you? I noticed you were reading the label on that medicine bottle earlier."

Inukashi couldn't answer.

The old woman stuck the flyer between two crumbling bricks.

A paper flyer in this day and age? How old-fashioned. They had meant to mock her for that, but in the end, their lips wouldn't open one bit.

⁂

All of that had happened three days ago. In a stroke of good luck, Shuri hadn't appeared again, and Inukashi hoped it stayed that way forever. The older Shion also hadn't sent any new updates, and they found themself getting slightly worried.

Then….

Inukashi went to check on baby Shion, who was napping on a white, long-haired dog instead of the baby carriage. They took his peaceful breathing to mean that it was

a comfortable place to sleep. Naptime was almost over, though, and he would awaken soon. Once he did, perhaps they could feed him some of yesterday's leftover soup. His diaper needed changing first, of course, and….

Their eyes landed on the flyer lying on the table. They had yet to throw it out. While they had crumpled it into a ball, they had found they couldn't bring themself to toss it out, and so they had smoothed it flat once more.

On that wrinkled paper flyer read the words "Tomorrow's Sky" in big red letters. Even though Inukashi didn't want to read it, their eyes moved of their own volition.

It was a place where children could live in safety, without being exposed to any trouble. A place where they could go to school, study, and equip themselves with tools for their futures.

"'Tomorrow's Sky' is a launching point for hope. We have generous aid from the city, and can provide long-term support for each individual child. Please, stop by for a visit.

” That was the general gist of the flyer’s contents.

The flyer had pictures of the dining area and of immaculately clean rooms, if simply furnished. There was a picture of babies sleeping in cribs, each one swaddled with cloth that appeared quite warm.

Perhaps…little Shion would be happier there.

Inukashi stared at the flyer.

If Shion said one day that he wanted to be an engineer, or a doctor, or that it was his dream to open a flower shop—if his heart became set on his future—I wouldn’t be able to do a thing for him. All I can do is make sure he makes it to the end of each day without dyin’—that’s what I *can teach him, at least. But what use is that? This isn’t the West Block anymore—it’s part of No.6. New buildings are bein’ built, and the kinds of food and essentials we can get our hands on just keep increasin’. To top it all off, we don’t gotta live in fear of death anymore. Shion, the world you’re gonna live in is a different one from mine.*

Inukashi wanted to cry.

They didn't want to be separated from him, but it might just be that things couldn't continue like this.

What do I do? What am I supposed to do? What the hell should I do?

Perhaps they could get Mama Karan's opinion? They could ask Shion, too…but, oh, didn't this "Tomorrow's Sky" place have funding from the city? That meant Shion must be involved somehow, and if so, he would surely lend a hand. Even if he wasn't involved, they knew he would.

I'm sure that with Shion and Mama Karan's help, we can figure out some way forward where I won't need to give up little Shion. We'll definitely figure something out. Inukashi felt their heart lighten slightly, and unconsciously, they let out a great sigh.

When the rain let up, they could…hm? It was already letting up. Well then, when baby Shion woke up, why not go to Lost Town? Inukashi could go see Mama Karan

and Shion, and….

The white dog raised its head, its pointed ears twitching. A small brown dog got up and began to pace as well, unsettled.

“What is it?” Inukashi asked.

The dogs were clearly on edge—they had noticed a presence that human senses couldn’t.

Was there someone downstairs?

The bottom floor was made up of crumbled walls and what had once been a lobby. On sunny days, Inukashi would do some cooking there, or wash the dogs. Today, all the large dogs were sheltering from the rain in their various sleeping spots.

Inukashi listened carefully.

The dogs downstairs weren’t making a racket; if there was an intruder, they’d let Inukashi know first thing by howling. They’d threaten the intruder and chase them out, and if the situation called for it, they’d surround them from every direction and attack as a pack—that was the way

Inukashi had trained them. It was no exaggeration to say that their dogs were an elite squad.

Inukashi strained their ears again.

As expected, there was nothing audible. They could sense, however, that something was off—they felt it with their skin.

Something was different than usual.

For a moment, they thought it might be because of the goat. They had gotten their hands on it about two weeks ago, skinny and limping around lost in an empty lot near the hotel. In the chaos that brought down an entire city, humans hadn't been the only ones who had gotten separated, torn apart by death, thrown aside, tossed to the four winds, or who had lost their place or people to return to.

In the West Block, no creatures had been special enough to be called pets, but there were domestic animals. Naturally, a significant number of such animals had had their owners disappear on them (or rather, get killed) or lose their lives in the

turmoil. The majority of those animals had been culled by humans—cows, horses, pigs, and chickens had all been turned to meat.

A few dogged ones, however, had nonetheless survived. That skinny goat was likely one such creature. It was just skin and bones, so it wouldn't produce milk, nor result in much meat. Just keeping it alive for its own sake had no value, but if Inukashi slaughtered it, it could at least feed their dogs. With that in mind, they had brought it home.

Contrary to their expectations, though, the goat was not only ornery, but also a big eater. On top of that, it possessed a nearly human intelligence, even if it wasn't quite as clever as the dogs, with which it got along alright. Inukashi found that they couldn't bring themself to slaughter it.

Was it because of the goat? they thought again.

No, that wasn't it. The dogs had already grown accustomed to the goat, and its presence wouldn't set them off at all. Plus,

the goat was off at that old drunkard's place right now.

This situation had nothing to do with the goat. It was something more insidious—something far sharper and more dangerous.

It's an intruder, Inukashi thought. *Someone or something insidious, sharp, and dangerous has crept into our everyday lives—the lives of me, little Shion, and the dogs.*

It felt just like the granny from a few days ago, really, but while that granny had been the height of annoying, she hadn't posed a direct threat. This time, Inukashi was fully on edge—they felt as if they were about to break out in goosebumps. No, it wasn't the granny. This presence wasn't half as carefree as she had been.

Speaking of which, there had been an emergency broadcast a day or two ago from the city. It seemed that the bodies of multiple unidentified murdered victims had been found. As the culprit had yet to be apprehended, the city advised that people take liberal amounts of caution.

Good grief, everything had gotten so *soft*.

As Inukashi had watched the Security Bureau's public broadcast van fade into the distance, their shoulders had tensed up.

Up until two years ago, dead bodies weren't a rare sight, regardless of the cause of death. Murder, suicide, death by illness or starvation, or becoming a victim of a massacre…. Hadn't life been no different from a corpse bazaar? The Security Bureau which had driven that broadcast van—how many corpses had *they* caused?

Of course, Inukashi knew how it was. They knew full well that both the Security Bureau and the No.6 of two years ago had been completely different to how they were now. Even so, Inukashi had wanted to hurl stones; they had wanted to spit on them; they wanted to give them a violent piece of their mind.

Hunching their shoulders, Inukashi had swallowed down their insults and feelings. Ever since then, they had put the broadcast out of their mind. Now, however, those

memories resurfaced.

So a murderer's been hanging about, and has now snuck into my humble abode?

No, that was impossible.

There was no way the dogs would overlook someone so dangerous. Not only could the dogs fight, but when it came to security, they made the even most cutting edge anti-intruder system look like a toy with how competent and capable they were—of course, that was thanks to Inukashi's perfect training.

Quietly opening the door, Inukashi snapped their fingers. A big black dog silently approached them. "Protect little Shion," they instructed. "Don't leave his side, no matter what happens."

Heeding the order, the black dog came inside and crouched beside the white dog.

That should do it for this room. Having entrusted it to the two dogs' capable paws, there was nothing for Inukashi to fear. They headed into the hallway and silently

closed the door before descending the stairs. The dogs who had been sleeping on the landing woke up, tails wagging in unison.

Come with me, Inukashi signaled to them with a finger, and the dogs followed behind exactly as they were told. Not a single one of them made a noise.

The rain had been letting up, and now a gust of wind, more chilly than cool, blew through the hotel. The frozen season would be here before long. After the winter of two years ago, free warming shelters had been set up and heating units had begun to be distributed, so the fear of death by cold had mostly diminished. Just through filling out a simple application, anyone who wanted would be provided with food, household furniture, and even living expenses. A hospital had been built, and the marketplace had also been reconstructed. The goods on display there were no longer moldy cheese or half-rotten meat—no, they were juicy fruits and vegetables delivered directly from the South Block, and there were even fresh

meat and dairy products at affordable prices.

People had been freed not just from death by hypothermia, but from the fear of starvation. This was a seriously big deal—progress had come surprisingly far in such a short time.

Shion was at the center of the Restructural Committee, and at times, Inukashi would mentally send him their praises. Though they kept those words to themself, and would by no means send them to him for real, praise was praise.

Not gonna lie, I think it's amazin', they would think. *But y'know what, Shion? Sometimes it gets kinda hard to breathe. Yeah, it's true that I didn't wanna die—I wanted to survive, no matter what it took… but that doesn't mean I wanna live the way No.6 does. The West Block had its own way of daily life, and I don't want that to all be for nothin', see. I…I wanna live in the West Block.*

Don't absorb us. Don't turn everything into No.6. I wanna live in the West Block, Shion.

Inukashi went down the stairs. The wind was still blowing, and it felt colder than it had earlier.

There was no one on the first floor. The broken roof left areas open to the sky, so the ground had naturally become covered in puddles here and there, and several dogs were lapping at them. The sky was covered in grey clouds, and the ground was strewn with soaked concrete, exposed to the elements. It was a faded, bleak scene, but there wasn't anything strange or out of place. Everything was just as it usually was.

Was it all just Inukashi's imagination playing tricks on them?

They had gotten caught up overthinking, their nerves all set on edge. It was especially during times like this that they needed to be careful. When everything reeked of suspicion and danger, what was *truly* suspicious and dangerous could be easily overlooked.

Clatter.

A sound came from the second floor.

What was *truly* suspicious and dangerous could be easily overlooked.

No, don't tell me—little Shion!

Inukashi made a mad dash up the stairs. The door to their room was slightly ajar—the door that they were sure they had closed. The muscles of their face spasmed; their heart was about to leap out of their chest.

You're kidding me, right? C'mon!

"Shion!" Inukashi burst into the room. The white and black dogs both lifted their heads at the same time. Between them, baby Shion was still fast asleep. His eyes may have been closed, but he wasn't dead—merely sleeping.

Oh, thank God. You're safe, they thought. *Of course those two protected you. There's no way you wouldn't be okay….*

Then, Inukashi nearly gasped.

Some kind of small brown ball dashed past their feet. With a light leap, it disappeared behind the faded sofa. A small brown ball, just about the size of a handful…. A small…brown….

Inukashi swallowed. This time, actual goosebumps broke out over their skin.

No, it can't be. There's no way in hell!

Behind Inukashi, a dog suddenly howled. Just as they were about to turn around, a hand closed over their mouth. Despite their best attempt to shake it off, but it stayed fast in place.

Slowly, another arm wrapped around their throat.

Chapter 3: In the Depths of Truth

"Nay, take my life and all; pardon not that."
- *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV Scene 1, by William Shakespeare

⁂

Down flashed the knife.

Shion curled in on himself.

Don't close your eyes, he ordered himself. No matter where his attacker tried to stab or slash, he was determined to see through his movements. He would see through them; he would strike back.

Don't throw away the chance that there might be a way out of this, he thought.

He had learned how to fight in his own way, and he would fight back until the very last moment—that was the only gateway to survival.

The black shadow crossed his vision. The glint of the knife grew veiled in darkness.

"Shit—" A deep snarl rang out, the scent of

an animal filled the air, and the knife fell to the ground with a clatter. “Shit, let go, let me go—”

Huh? A dog?

Its fur just as dark as the man’s garments, a pure black dog had its fangs buried deep in his attacker’s wrist. A sharp whistle rang out, and it leapt away from the fallen man, halting its offensive.

“Shion! Shion, are you alright?”

Ah, that was the voice of….

“Inukashi!”

“Shion, did he hurt you? Are you okay?” Inukashi squatted by Shion’s side.

“I’m alright. Or, well…he *might* have landed a hit on me….” Shion tried to stand, but an intense pain immediately shot up his arm, and he cried out involuntarily.

“Hey, take it easy. Sit tight for a bit and I’ll go get someone, alright?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I can walk. More importantly….” Shion glanced at their surroundings. Both the man and the dog were gone.

“He ran away, the bastard. He really hauled ass to get the hell outta here, huh? My dog’s on his tail right now, so just leave it to him. C’mon, we gotta stop your bleeding.” Ripping the sleeve off of Shion’s shirt, Inukashi tied it around his arm as tightly as they could. “There, that should do it. Now, can you stand?”

“Yep, I’m alright.” If he moved carefully, the pain remained at a tolerable level; it seemed it wasn’t too deep of a wound. He had gotten pretty good at dodging, if he might say so himself—he could move like a flash to protect himself.

If you don’t want to die, then move.

There won’t be a next time if you don’t.

Shion, you want to survive, don’t you? If so, protect yourself with your own abilities.

Keep fighting back until the very end.

Nezumi had taught him those things, over and over again. They weren't mere memories, but a part of Shion—carved into him, one with his flesh and blood.

"Thanks, Inukashi. What are you doing here, though?"

Inukashi responded with a click of their tongue. They could make any number of sounds with their tongue and fingertips, and it was by combining those sounds with gestures that they commanded their dogs. The dogs carried out their master's orders with accuracy and precision, and Inukashi could control them however they wished, drawing out and utilizing their full potential. It was a power that seemed almost divine in nature—Shion was always impressed whenever he saw Inukashi use it.

This time, however, their tongue-click was directed not at a dog, but at Shion.

"Like that even matters right now!" they exclaimed. "You always only focus on the shit that doesn't matter. C'mon, get a move on! You know you're gonna freak out

Mama Karan when she sees you all covered in blood like this. Know what that's called? Being a shitty-ass son. Did that ever occur to you? Surely you're at least aware of that…woah, that was close! The hell is this thing?" Inukashi began clearing away the steel wire, complaining all the while. "Sheesh, who's stringing this shit up outta nowhere? They're breakin' every traffic law in the book! Wait, more importantly—ain't this straight-up an attempt on your *life*? Or maybe more like assault? Either way, it's a hell of a crime. Yeesh, gives me the chills."

"Inukashi."

"*What.*"

"You're chatty today."

Inukashi gave a dry cough, which Shion got the feeling was to cover up a moment of surprise.

He picked up the knife with his uninjured hand. That man had been wearing gloves—he had left no fingerprints, and likely no other evidence, either. Shion carefully

gripped the knife by the handle. As he thought, it was a double-edged dagger, and extremely deadly—a tool developed for the sole purpose of injuring or killing one's opponent.

"'One tends to talk excessively, it seems, when truth hides on the backside of the tongue,'" Shion quoted. "Nezumi once said something along those lines, didn't he? A line from some play, I think."

"How the hell would I know?" Inukashi snarled at him. "It's always frickin' Nezumi *this* and Nezumi *that* with you! If you were gonna stay so obsessed like this forever, ya shoulda just gone with the damn guy! It's not like anyone forced ya to stay, so know when to give up on him! You dumbass! Idiot! Piece of trash! Pathetic and dense and a total disgrace, to boot! And…and…! Ugh, I don't even feel like laughing at you anymore."

They went on and on. Their insults were always simple and direct, piercing right to the truth of the matter. As a result, they sometimes cut the heart more sharply than the edge of a knife.

“Yeah, that’s true. You’re completely right, Inukashi.”

It was by my own volition that I stayed behind, and that I bid farewell to your retreating back. I resolved to await a new No.6 here—to await that day when our paths finally cross once more. Even so, I’m on the brink of falling to my knees. I'm about to start regretting letting you go—regretting not going with you.

Why am I this weak? Why do I desire this much from you? Nezumi, I…I can’t hold myself back anymore. I’m so pathetic I can’t even bring myself to mock myself for it, but….

I miss you.

“You’re exhausted,” Inukashi said quietly. “Look, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, but you’re workin’ too hard. You’re runnin’ yourself into the ground. I’m tellin’ ya for your own good—forget about work and just take it easy for a bit. If you don’t, you’re gonna collapse like a bag of bricks before long. I dunno how much they're payin’ you, but you’re already working

your ass off while you've got this gigantic load on your shoulders. If it's all just gonna end in you dropping dead or getting offed by some rando, you aren't bein' paid *nearly* enough!"

"I'm not dead yet. Don't start piling dirt on my grave," Shion said.

"Listen, *dumbass*," said Inukashi. "You're only standing here 'cause *I* made it in the nick of time. If I hadn't, you'd be bleedin' out on the ground right now. Ugh, the frickin' lengths you made me go to. And who'd have thought it'd be *today*, of all days? I damn near didn't make it in time."

"What?"

"What?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Inukashi?"

"W-whaddaya talking about? You're makin' zero sense."

"What do you mean by 'today of all days?'" Shion asked. "Did you know that man was going to attack me?" *Surely not. That was impossible.*

“Not a chance,” Inukashi said. “How would *I* know something like that? There’s no way in hell, man—you’re accusing me of some crazy shit. Unless you’re tryna say *I’m* the one who has it out for ya? Ha, that’s actually insane! If I wanted to kill you, why the hell would I ask someone else to do it when I’ve got my dogs? Just one bite to your throat and it’d be alllll over for you. A single whistle would be all it takes —why would *I* use something as crude as a *knife*?” They rambled on and on.

One tends to talk excessively, it seems, when truth hides on the backside of the tongue….

Deep within the alley, a black dog appeared—the very one that had protected Shion. Its compact form seemed to brim with intelligence, and it had pointed ears and long, sturdy legs that radiated the fierceness that befitted an attack dog.

“Did you lose him, boy? Hm? …Right, of course, there’s no way you coulda kept up once he got in a car. It’s okay, don’t sweat it. You did great—more than enough, really,” said Inukashi. “Shion, be sure to

give him a treat later. He did enough work to deserve at least two or three pieces of meat on the bone. While you're at it, you'd better treat me to dinner too, got it? Now, let's getcha home. It wouldn't be funny if you wound up bleedin' out after I saved you by the skin of your teeth, just 'cause we stood around wastin' time. C'mon, let's go."

"Looks like the bleeding's stopped, thanks to you," said Shion.

"Heh heh, I mean, the both of us have made it through our fair share of bad situations. 'Course I'd get good at staunchin' bleeding, at least." Throwing the now-wound steel wire over their shoulder, they turned their back to him. Likely, they had figured they could sell the wire, but it was to ward off any further conversation that they had turned away.

Inukashi was hiding something.

Shion clenched his hand into a tight fist and swallowed down the questions rising in his throat.

⁂

The bleeding had indeed stopped. The doctor who had checked Shion over determined that though it wasn't a shallow wound, it wouldn't require stitches, and so after being given medicine, Shion had hurried on home.

While Karan didn't lose her composure, the color had drained from her face. Shion knew that though she wouldn't show it, she would only worry herself sick, so he decided to tell her the truth.

"…So you mean," Karan said, "you were attacked by that murderer? Rumor has it that they've found four or five victims from all the way in the old West Block to around Lost Town…."

"*Three* victims. The rumors have gotten a little exaggerated," said Shion.

"Yeah, and you were about to become the fourth," said Inukashi with a smirk. They were holding little Shion on their knee. He had been given a bread roll and some fruit, and so was in high spirits, holding out his

hands to Karan and saying, “Gwamma, Gwamma, up.”

“Why, Shion, you’re calling me Gwamma! I’m so happy—though just a bit sad. There, there, I’ll pick you up, alright?” cooed Karan. “But, Shion, why were you attacked? Is it because of your connection to the Restructural Committee? My, Shion, did you already finish your bread? Let’s drink some water, then. There’s some milk, too. Shion, dear, shouldn’t you contact the Security Bureau right away? Thank goodness you were unhurt today, but tomorrow could be a different story. If you were to be attacked again…oh, I shudder to even think about it!”

“Mom,” Shion said. “Which one of us are you talking to? Your words are all over the place.” He gave a wry smile. As she held little Shion, Karan seemed younger than usual.

“My *head’s* all over the place,” she said. “I feel like a bag of flour spilled all over the floor. Of course I want to get it all cleared up, too! So, I’ll ask you again, and please tell it to me straight: why were you

attacked? Does it really have something to do with your Restructural Committee role, after all?"

"I don't think so," Shion replied. "They haven't found anything in common between the three murder victims so far… so maybe rather than going after specific victims, the culprit's randomly attacking whoever they run into."

"So something like a street slasher?" Karan asked, voice trembling.

"Seems pretty likely. The Security Bureau's currently doing all they can to investigate, so I think some pieces of the puzzle will start coming together shortly. I'll be handing in that knife as evidence, too—it's not something just anyone can get their hands on, and so could be the key to solving this mystery."

"That knife, with your blood on it…. How dreadful—I can't bear the sight of it. A street slasher is such a terrifying thought. I do hope he'll be caught soon." Karan shuddered, and little Shion looked up, perturbed.

A street slasher. Was that really all there was to it? Was it truly just a bloodthirsty murderer who didn't care who his victims were?

Nicely done, Board Chairman.

The words he had said came to mind. It was something only someone who knew Shion for who he was would say, meaning that Shion hadn't been one amongst the masses, but distinctly singled out as a target.

"Mmm, yummy! This is the best!" Inukashi exclaimed, spoon in hand.

"My, Inukashi, so the mushroom al ajillo is to your taste?"

"It's freakin' delicious. That's Mama Karan's first-class cooking for ya!"

"Why, you praise me to the high heavens every time I see you! If you had let me know you were coming by, I could have prepared something even better."

"Ain't nothin' that could be better than

this. Can I get seconds?"

"Of course, help yourself!" Karan said. "Shion, dear, that's not for you—it's a bit too soon for you to try that! Why don't you have this potato instead? Shion, be sure to eat, too. You still have some appetite, don't you? Yes? What is it? Shion, are you sleepy? Goodness me, your eyes are half-closed!"

"You really *are* all over the place," said Shion. "My head is spinning. Mom, I want a turn holding Shion; can I?" He reached out his hands, but Karan shook her head.

"Not this time," she said. "Your arm's injured—we can't have you drop Shion if the strength goes out of it. He's sleepy now, anyway, so let's let him nap on the sofa."

Even when lowered onto the sofa, little Shion didn't fuss at all as his eyes fell shut.

"He's really such a wonderful child," Karan said. "Now, Shion, if you have even a little bit of an appetite, please eat up. Eating is the key to everything. If you eat, you can

overcome almost anything. Isn't that right, Inukashi?"

"*Spot on*. This al ajillo? Is making me feel invincible."

Karan laughed, as she often did when Inukashi was around.

"Inukashi." Sitting in a chair, Shion called out to them. They seemed to stiffen. Was their guard up for some reason?

"Say, Inukashi, did something happen today?" he asked.

Inukashi put the spoon down and looked up. "Did something *happen*? Man, you were literally attacked! What could be more important than that? You mean that's not enough for ya, and you wanna add something on *top* of that to boot? Greedy-ass!"

"When I was attacked, you were already in Lost Town," Shion said. "Every single other time you've dropped by, you've always either made sure to tell us beforehand or come by because we invited you. Today

was neither of those. You came without notice, saving me from danger. So—what brought you to Lost Town?"

Inukashi's brow furrowed. Then, they made a big show of sighing. "A reason, huh? Well, I have one! I most certainly do! I wanted to ask Mama Karan somethin' about little Shion, see, but it's not all that urgent, so I'll save it for when things aren't so crazy and we can chill and talk it out."

"Not all that urgent?" And yet you came without notice at this hour? It was completely out of character for the Inukashi that Shion knew.

"Are you sure you want to save it for another time?" asked Karan. "I'll always lend a listening ear if there's something you want to discuss. Goodness, Shion's finally out. What an angelic sleeping face he has! I'm enchanted!"

Inukashi smiled at her—it was a gentle, beautiful smile. "Thanks, Mama Karan. You always put me at ease. Your *son*, however…."

Once more, they let out an intentional sigh. “Shion, why’re you such an argumentative know-it-all? Ya think that people won’t act without a reason, huh? Listen up, ‘cause I’ll tell ya this: people don’t live only using their heads. There’s plenty of other ways to live by. They act erratically, impulsively, for whatever reason at all, or by that which drives their hearts—dontcha forget it! I'm not the kinda person who can tie up everything with a neat logical bow and find rational solutions with my head, unlike….”

Inukashi paused. Then, they followed with, “…Unlike you. Nope, I’m not like you at all. I’m more of an emotional type, really.”

How nice it would be to have a logical answer to everything, to live using only one’s head, for one’s heart to obey one’s mind. To let go of feelings that never stopped aching….

No, that’s not right, murmured a voice in Shion’s chest.

That’s not right. Those are things I’ve won. I’ve gained a heart that won’t obey my mind,

and feelings so poignant they ache. If I let them go, I'll return to my original hollowness. I'll regress into a dishonest adult who calls submission a virtue. I haven't regressed yet, though—all that I've gained has been tethering me.

I know this. All of it. I know all this already! Even so, it's still just so difficult!

"Ah, fuck it all!" Shion slammed his fist on the table. He used his injured arm by accident, however, and pain and numbness shot from the wound to the tips of his fingers. Biting his lip, he held back a cry.

Inukashi and Karan exchanged a look.

"Ah…. Sorry for yelling."

"Wh-what the hell, man?" said Inukashi. "Are you mad at *me*? I didn't say anything wrong, alright? I'm not gonna apologize! Like hell your intimidation tactics are gonna hurt or get to me even one bit! Not having seconds of Mama Karan's al ajillo would suck way more, actually!"

"I'm mad at *myself*," said Shion. "And if you

want seconds, go get some from the pot yourself."

He was irritated. He was angry at himself for being so wrapped around someone else's little finger, no matter who they were.

"I take back what I said," said Inukashi, raising a hand. "You're not an argumentative know-it-all—you're the *height* of being an emotional nightmare to deal with. Even earlier, too, you suddenly snapped, threw a fit, and got completely out of hand!"

"Inukashi, don't exaggerate," said Shion. "I was just a bit irritated that time."

"Yeah, you sure were! You're an emotional pain in the ass, just like I thought. You always drag me into disaster. Honestly, if you weren't Mama Karan's son? I would have already cut and run."

"I don't think I'm *that* bad," said Shion. "But yeah, I did cause you trouble, I'll acknowledge that. So, you say I dragged you into disaster *this* time, too? What kind,

pray tell? I can't recall."

Inukashi snorted. ”Don’t ask leading questions! Anyway, you’re the cause of disaster. To *me*, at any rate.”

“…Maybe you’re the one who’s mad, not me,” said Shion. “Are you mad at me?”

“I’m *always* mad. Mad at you, mad at your —” They cut off mid-sentence again. Instead of continuing, they looked to the side and whistled. The black dog, who had been lying in a corner of the room, got up to sit by Inukashi’s side. “Hey, I’ll lend you this dog.”

“Huh?”

“Out of all my dogs, this guy’s number one when it comes to fighting,” said Inukashi. “He's smart as a whip, and his ability to sniff out danger is no joke. What's more, he's a good, calm boy who’ll never disobey his master's orders."

"A top-notch bodyguard, I see,” said Shion.

"Yep. You already got a show of his skill.”

"Yeah, his attack was incredible. Saved me by the skin of my teeth, really," said Shion. "He's very dependable. Actually, I was just going to stop by tomorrow to borrow a dog for a bodyguard—thanks, Inukashi. But how did you know I needed one?"

"Enough with the questions! I'm sick of them!" said Inukashi. "Whatever, I get it. I shall answer your question, *noble sir*—that old guy Rikiga asked me to, heh. Sorry for the boring answer."

"*Rikiga-san* did?" Shion was surprised. Karan, who had been covering little Shion with a blanket as he slept, also widened her eyes.

"Yep," said Inukashi. "He had heard the news about that street slasher or whatever, and came by my place. Said he wanted to rent some guard dogs, and begged me for one for himself, for Mama Karan, and for you, saying he'd pay for all of 'em. Heh, that old guy sure is something. Seems like business has been goin' well for him lately, so he's straight-up rolling in it—he gave me quite a bit of dough. There's high demand for guard dogs right now, though,

so I don't have enough of ‘em. Well, I guess there's this one.” Inukashi scratched the black dog’s neck. Perhaps they knew the trick to it, because the dog closed his eyes in contentment and let out a thin, contented whine. There wasn't a hint of the savagery from when he had bared his fangs. Inukashi continued, saying, “He's top-class, so you can trust him. I'll give you a crash course in how to command him. You're both smart, so he'll get the hang of it in no time. He's a really good dog, though he does eat a lot. He’d love it if you’d brush him every morning, too.”

"Got it,” said Shion. “I’ll do my very best taking care of him while I'm borrowing him. But if you gave me your best dog, what did you give to Rikiga?"

"I gave him a goat instead of a dog."

"What? A *goat*?"

"Yup,” said Inukashi. “I got my hands on a lost goat recently, so I lent it to him. Goats have nastier tempers than you'd think, and they’re proud—a perfectly acceptable substitute for a guard dog. Plus, they'll eat

the weeds in your yard. I told that old man it'd be like killing two birds with one stone, so he happily took it home. 'Course, this goat has an *extra* nasty temper, so maybe he's been skewered on its horns by now."

"Oh my!" exclaimed Karan, laughing. "Inukashi, is that really true? The thought of Rikiga being chased by a goat.... It sounds like something right out of a comedy show, doesn't it? I just can't help but laugh."

"It's hilarious, right?" said Inukashi. "Oh yeah, did I mention he said he was gonna come by again to buy some bread? Ah, and he said he wanted ya to take this whole guard dog thing as a token of his friendship, Mama Karan. Heh heh, seems like he's tryna work his way up from being just friends. Told him loud and clear that I'm sure that he'll never get any further than the friendship stage."

"Rikiga *is* a good friend. He could perhaps even become a dear one, someday," said Karan. "Just like the two of you."

“Huh? By ‘the two of you,’ d’ya mean me and Shion?”

“Yes, of course,” said Karan.

“Are we dear friends?”

“Aren’t you? I can’t picture you as anything but.”

Inukashi blinked. They tried to say something, but no words came out.

“I think so too,” said Shion. “What, you mean you don’t, Inukashi?”

“Huh? I—I dunno a-anythin’ about that. How do I benefit from being close friends with *you*? What kinda perks or profit do I get outta it? Ya gonna make me rich or something? Or maybe…hm? Mama Karan, there’s an amazing smell coming from the kitchen.” Their nostrils flared.

“My goodness, what a keen nose as always! The grilled chicken breast will be ready very soon. It’s one of your favorites, right, Inukashi? Ah, Shion, you sit down. I’ll get it ready, so you keep your dear friend company, alright? You’re injured today, so

let's promote you to host." Stopping Shion as he tried to stand up, Karan whisked off to the kitchen and disappeared.

The delicious aroma of meat thickened. Shion could *hear* Inukashi licking their lips.

"Heh heh, grilled chicken? It's like I've died and gone to heaven, I tell ya."

"Right? Close friendship with me comes with unlimited grilled chicken. An amazing benefit, don't you think?"

"An amazing benefit, for real. Okay, fine. We're close friends, then."

"What an honor. Well then, thanks once again for putting up with me." Shion proffered a hand to them, and Inukashi lightly tapped his palm.

"Got any close friends besides me, Shion?"

"Huh? No, I don't."

He had, once.

Safu.

We understood each other, and openly shared

our innermost thoughts between us. No, actually; the only one who felt that way was me. I barely understood her in the end, didn't I? I couldn't make a single one of her wishes come true.

Inukashi lightly waved their right hand. "Shion, there's something I kinda want to ask ya."

"Ask away."

"What's the difference between me and Nezumi?"

The question pierced Shion's eardrums. He felt a vivid pain—one that hurt more than even the knife wound.

"C'mon, try and gimme a proper answer. If you even can, that is."

"Inukashi…."

"Heheh, seems like I've been infected by my dear friend's habit of asking endless questions, and I couldn't help but ask," said Inukashi. "That's *you,* by the way. I *won't* let you get away with saying you can't answer."

“Look here, Inukashi….”

“How are Nezumi and I different?” Inukashi insisted. “What’s the difference between us?”

Their face was serious, without a hint of a mocking smile or mischief in their expression at all.

“…Nezumi’s not a close friend,” said Shion. He caught their tense gaze, unable to avert his eyes from their small, brown face. “I want to become true friends with you. I want to hang out and chat about whatever; I want to laugh and eat together. I want to turn to you for serious advice, and receive your advice in return. But, Inukashi—I don’t desire any of that from Nezumi. I don’t want to become close friends with him.”

“Yeah, me neither,” said Inukashi. “Not even for a whole *mountain* of gold coins! I wanna stay as far away from him as possible—seriously, I don’t want him anywhere near me, and I don't think he's the kind of guy it's a good idea to let get

near you, not one bit. You've been waiting, though, haven't ya? You've been waiting all this time, believing he's gonna come back. The hell's up with that, huh? You crazy? Nah, maybe not. You've gotta be really tired. I know it's not just your job that's been wearing ya out, for sure."

"…Yeah, but…."

"But what?"

"It's thanks to Nezumi's promise that I've been able to keep going without falling apart."

"What?"

"Nezumi promised reunion. He swore that without fail, he would come back."

"Reunion will come, Shion."

I've managed to come this far by believing in those four words. I've been able to keep struggling on with building not a false city-state considered "utopian" or "holy," but a No.6 worthy of people living as people. *There's a mountain's worth of issues, and we're still midway down the road towards a*

distant goal—honestly, I'm not entirely sure we can even make it there. Even so, we'll keep going as far as we can. As long as we can still press forward, then we will. This chance given to us by Elyurias is the only one we have.

Nezumi, what I want isn't for you to hold me up. I don't want to keep clinging to you, either. All I want is just to see you again. I want to see the real you.

"Dude, how old *are* ya?" Inukashi asked. "You're so young and naive! A girl in puppy love would be less gullible than you."

"That's a controversial statement, Inukashi. You're in for a storm of girls in puppy love collectively booing you."

"Yeah, like I give a shit about what anyone says to me. Hey, Shion," said Inukashi. "I'll give you just one piece of advice. Nezumi, he knows how to live on his own." Raising a finger, Inukashi wagged it from side to side. "I've got my dogs, I've got my kid, and I even made a close friend to boot! I've got you and Mama Karan, and that old guy Rikiga is head over heels for her—

everyone has someone else. We're living with these connections to others. Nezumi, though—he's always been alone. He's *always* been all on his lonesome ever since I first met him, and he's someone who can live just fine like that. Don't go choosing a partner like that—you're not gonna get anything outta it, and no matter what you do, you'll get nowhere. Fold that shit up, stuff it into a box, and shove it outta sight into the corner of some warehouse."

It was sound advice.

Shion wanted to follow it, if he could—it would probably make him feel much lighter.

Lighter, and then empty.

"Ahh, I feel so useless!" He planted his face into the table, causing the aroma of the al ajillo to swirl in the air.

"Hey, don't spill it; that's a waste! If you're not gonna eat it, then *I* will."

"Inukashi," Shion mumbled.

"What?"

“That was a tough pill to swallow.” His cheek was still pressed to the table.

“What was?”

“Your advice. I mean, I get it now. Nezumi’s lived his whole life alone, and can keep going on just fine that way, huh? That makes sense. I never thought of it like that before, but…you’re right. He can stand fine on his own.”

“I wonder.” Inukashi shrugged. “I might be eatin’ my words here, but I can't say for sure that the Nezumi I *think* I know is one and the same with who Nezumi actually is. Assumptions are just assumptions, in the end. Who knows? He might have some unexpectedly soft side to him. But, y’know, who gives a shit. Shion, I’m giving ya my sincere advice, but I know you won't listen. I know with complete certainty that you’re not gonna listen to any of it, ever.“

"But you gave it anyway, huh? Thank you."

“Well, that’s ‘cause we're close friends, yeah?” Inukashi grinned.

Just as they did, Karan came out of the kitchen, but not with the plate of chicken. Instead, the edges of a white cloth peeked out from between her fingers.

"...Shion," Karan said. Her eyes damp, she held her hands forward as if making an offering. "…It's Tsukiyo. He's passed away."

"What?"

The black-furred mouse left behind by Nezumi had been getting on in years. He usually spent most days asleep on Shion's bed, neither running about nor squeaking with abandon. Even so, whenever Shion or Karan checked in, Tsukiyo would still raise his head and wiggle his ears. Sometimes, he would get up to sit on someone's shoulder or knee. Shion had lowered his guard, as a result. He had thought Tsukiyo would hold on a little longer.

He took the little body, wrapped up in a white handkerchief, into his hands.

He could tell with one look that Tsukiyo was no longer breathing. The dead mouse

looked almost artificial, and, to Shion, something about him seemed like he had gone somewhere far away.

"Tsukiyo ate some apple and bread before dinner, even if only a little. He drank some water, and went to sleep just like that. When I went to check on him just now, though…he wasn't moving, and felt cold to the touch, and…." Karan said, her words coming out choked.

"Mm. Thank you, Mom. I'm really glad that up until his final moments, Tsukiyo could still eat your delicious bread."

Tsukiyo, are you moving on already? You've helped me so much. You ran to place coin explosives in order to destroy Mother. You were with me when we escaped the Correctional Facility, when we cut through the blazing flames, and, most of all, you lived with me in that underground room.

We shared that brief time together, that daily life, those passing days.

Ah. So you're leaving me.

“Well, as long as you’re alive, you’re gonna die someday,” said Inukashi. “Tsukiyo got to eat delicious bread every day, from the moment he came here ’til the day he died. He must’ve been one happy mouse. Ah, Mama Karan, since Shion can’t do it today, I’ll help ya with the washing up instead. I’m great at washing anything. I’ll make ‘em sparkle so bright—I’ll even polish your floors if you want.”

Karan wiped her eyes and gave a faint smile. “Thank you, Inukashi. Well then, if you could do them after, that would be wonderful. I’ll bring out the food now.”

“Wahoo, gladly!”

Karan and Inukashi’s conversation weaved together with the sound of the wind.

Shion wrapped up Tsukiyo’s body with care.

⁂

While the next day couldn’t quite be called good weather, at least there was no rain. Now and then, the sun’s rays would filter through from between gaps in the clouds

and cast their pale light on the leaves of the trees, the colors of which were just starting to turn. It was still early afternoon, but the sun shone at an angle, and its red-tinged light had taken on a deeper quality.

The season was starting to change.

“Sorry about today,” apologized Shion. “I had meant to invite you to a picnic and everything, but….”

“Nah, it’s fine.” Inukashi waved off his apology. “I’m chill about most things. A gloomy place like this wouldn’t have been my first choice if I had any say in it, but… if fate wills it, then sure, I guess.”

“I didn’t know you believed in fate.”

“I’m always praying that things’ll play out however the gods want ‘em to. But this place is seriously gloomy, huh?” Looking up at the expanse of dense forest before them, Inukashi narrowed their eyes.

Before them stood the Mao Forest.

“Glad I handed off little Shion to Mama Karan,” they continued. “He’d definitely

hate being somewhere *this* dark. Hey, but isn't the general public forbidden from entering here? Or can you go wherever you want without a permit 'cause you're the chairman or whatever?"

"Well, anyone can go *partway* into the forest," said Shion. "The deepest part of the forest is exclusively for the Forest People, though, so you can't go in there, no matter who you are. Though if we eventually manage some sort of cultural relations with the Forest People, that might change in the future."

"Huh," came Inukashi's noncommittal response, and they yawned.

This was, in fact, the first time Shion had even approached the entrance to the Mao Forest, let alone set foot in it.

When No.6 had subsumed this place into itself, there had been a small population of humans living in it, known as the Forest People. Theirs were a people who had been cradled by the forest since time immemorial, long before the surface had been devastated and the world divided into

six cities. They had received its blessings, protected it, and coexisted in harmony with it.

No.6 had annihilated them.

No.6's army had torched their homes to the ground, indiscriminately murdering men, women, children, and the elderly alike. Then, in the dreadful aftermath of that razing, No.6 had committed the massive genocide that came to be known as the Mao Massacre.

Shion had cut off the new No.6 from the Mao Forest, setting it aside as a dwelling place for the few survivors of the Forest People, who had been living beneath the Correctional Facility. Nezumi was one of them, and one of the handful of survivors of the Mao Massacre. What he had chosen, however, was not the Mao Forest, but to go off somewhere beyond Shion's knowledge.

Shion and Inukashi continued along the narrow path, surrounded by trees. The deeper they went, the more trees there were, and the thicker their trunks grew. The fact that there were small benches

here and there meant that citizens of No.6 could still come and go freely as far as this point, but there was no path onward from here. None except the Forest People could go further in—any outsiders would be obstructed by the trees and the thick undergrowth. The Construction Bureau had erected a fence to prevent trespassers, but even without it, the natural barrier was all but impermeable to most.

The black dog raised his head high, nose twitching vigorously.

“The way he’s acting now means he’s monitoring his surroundings,” explained Inukashi. “You stop for a second, too.”

“Got it, coach.”

Raising their thumb, Inukashi jerked their chin, and the dog began to sniff around the thicket and at the roots of the trees. “This signal means investigate. Make sure you remember it, okay? It’s not like I’ve got all the time in the world, so I’m gonna pound the basics of dog handling into you in three days flat.”

“Can’t wait, coach.”

“C’mon, Shion, you only just got attacked yesterday, so what’s got you wanderin’ around a shady place like this? Well, you’ll be fine with me and the dog by your side, but it wouldn’t kill ya to be a little more careful sometimes.”

“It’s *because* you and the dog are here that I can relax a little,” said Shion. “I reported to the Security Bureau this morning about how I got attacked while out and about, so it seems they’re going to strengthen patrols throughout the whole city—it might be a little drastic, but I think that’ll stop criminals from having the run of the place.”

“‘Criminals,’ *plural*? You mean there are more than one of ‘em?” asked Inukashi. “Well, if that getaway car was what made you think of that, you can make a car move on its own as long as it has an autopilot system installed.”

“Hm, I wonder. They knew down to the moment when I was going to pass through the alley, and strung up a tripwire,

attacked me, and even had a getaway car at the ready. At least two people must have been involved, I think, if not more."

"Alright, so in other words, there's a whole gang of street slashers somewhere out there in the city?"

"Calling them a *gang* of street slashers might be pushing it…. Oh, this is a good spot." Shion crouched down at the base of a tree. Within the city, it would have been considered plenty large, but here in the forest it was a size smaller than the surrounding trees. Its trunk was white, and its diamond-shaped leaves were just barely starting to turn to their autumn colors—they would surely be a deep crimson before long. The tree would make for a beautiful grave marker.

"I told ya, I'm fine. I don't need something as fancy as a shovel." Inukashi whistled, and the black dog began to dig at the roots of the tree. Within moments, he had dug a reasonably deep hole.

"Amazing how you can substitute a dog for a shovel," said Shion.

“Compared to some happy-go-lucky human with zero sense of caution, he’s *way* more useful.”

“I hear you loud and clear, coach.” At the bottom of the hole, Shion gently placed Tsukiyo, wrapped in white cloth. He then set about filling the hole with earth, Inukashi lending a helping hand.

He didn’t know where Tsukiyo had been born, but Shion had heard that he was a descendant of the wild mice that had lived alongside the Forest People. If so, then it was only fitting that Tsukiyo be laid to rest here, in the Mao Forest.

Farewell, Tsukiyo. Return to the earth of your birthplace.

“Wow, so he gets a grave *and* prayers for his soul?” said Inukashi. “Fancy as hell. I can’t even believe what a luxury that is.”

“You’re right,” agreed Shion. “Especially when there are *people* whose whereabouts are still unknown—and not an insignificant number of them, either. We haven’t even

found their remains, let alone given them a proper resting place."

"Well, there was all that chaos—stuff like that was unavoidable, really," said Inukashi. "Oh yeah, there's that little girl who lives near your place—uh, Lili, was it?"

"Yeah, Lili. She's a big fan of Mom's muffins, and she's helping Mom watch over little Shion today. He seems pretty attached to Lili, too."

"Yeah, he gets super attached to girls," said Inukashi. "I can only imagine what his future holds for him! Well, Lili's definitely a good kid, but her dad's also on the missing persons list, isn't he?"

"Getsuyaku-san? Yeah, he is. In his case, though, there's hardly any information about him, and…. Inukashi? Is something wrong? What's with that expression?"

Inukashi's face was strained, their teeth firmly clenched.

"Inukashi?" Shion asked again.

“…Lili’s dad was named Getsuyaku?”

“He was,” Shion said. “There’s hardly any information in the city’s database on where he worked or what he did, and it seems he never said a word about it to his family, either. So, I think it’s likely he worked somewhere top-secret under the direct supervision of the city…maybe somewhere like the Security Bureau, the army, or the Information Confidentiality Bureau—or even the Correctional Facility.”

“The Correctional Facility.” Inukashi’s dark eyes trembled. Their smooth throat bobbed up and down, perhaps from swallowing.

“Seriously, what’s up? Don’t tell me you knew Getsuyaku-san?”

“Shion, I…um….”

All of a sudden, the black dog tensed up completely. He let out a deep growl, low and menacing.

Inukashi scrambled to their feet. “Shion, someone’s here. This ain’t good.”

Shion got to his feet as well. “No, it’s

alright. This is no enemy. Stay quiet, and calm down." Shion lightly waved his open palm up and down, and the dog ceased his growling, sitting back down. Almost simultaneously, a small black shadow leapt from the bushes, squeaking shrilly in front of Shion.

Cheep cheep, cheep cheep.

"Tsukiyo—"

He had just buried Tsukiyo, but this mouse was his splitting image—it was as though Tsukiyo had been reborn from the earth.

Cheep cheep, cheep cheep.

Shion knelt down and extended his hand. The mouse jumped on without a moment's hesitation, running straight up his arm and climbing up to his shoulder to chirp all the more loudly by his ear.

Cheeeep.

The thicket rustled; Inukashi leapt back. At Shion's side, the black dog didn't even flinch.

“Sasori,” Shion said.

From the leaves emerged an imposing man, so tall that one had to look up to see his face. His waist-length hair, his skin, his eyes—all were a grey color akin to mist at twilight. Inukashi took a few more steps back, crouched as if ready to run at any moment.

“Inukashi, there’s no need to be so tense,” said Shion. “This is Sasori, the chief of the Forest People. He won’t harm us.”

“You sure about that?” Inukashi wet their lips. “I ain’t quite down to play nice with a scowling giant like this guy. Sasori, was it? So like, scorpion? Aren’t those things *venomous*? The guy might be even nastier than Nezumi.”

“Shion.” Sasori stood in front of Shion, nodding his chin towards Inukashi. “You’ve brought along quite the talker.”

“Ah, yeah, you might find them more chatty than the average person. This is Inukashi, and they’re my dear friend.”

“Your dear friend? Inukashi—as in doglender?” asked Sasori. “That’s a strange name.”

“Tch, sorry it’s weird,” said Inukashi. “A hundred times better than having a venomous bug for a name, though.”

“Inukashi, scorpions aren’t bugs,” said Shion. “They’re arthropods.”

“Shut your trap, dumbass. Don’t start with one of your damn lectures at a time like this.”

Sasori looked back and forth between Shion and Inukashi. “So Nezumi wasn’t the only one who worked alongside you, Shion. Between Nezumi and this Inukashi person, however, it seems you aren’t blessed when it comes to the company you keep. Don’t you know anyone more… proper?”

“‘*Scuse me*? You ain’t watchin’ your words in the slightest, are ya?” said Inukashi. “Don’t lump me in with Nezumi. I’m *way* more honest and respectable than that scamming bastard.”

“I would agree that Nezumi isn’t respectable,” said Sasori. “The verdict, however, is still out on whether *you* are.”

“Tch, you damn…! I’m gonna get your ass,” growled Inukashi.

Ignoring Inukashi’s bared teeth, Sasori turned to face Shion once more. “Shion, we are deeply indebted to you. You gave the forest to us.”

“From the very start, it’s always belonged to the Forest People. I didn’t give it to you—I simply returned it.”

“Even so, I doubt it would have come back to us half as smoothly and effortlessly if not for you. As the chief of the Forest People, I convey our gratitude to you, the chairman of the Restructural Committee,” said Sasori. “I’ve wanted to tell you this for a long time—I’m glad that we met here today.”

“I also wanted to finally have a proper meeting with you,” said Shion. “We never had the chance for a real conversation

back then.”

“‘Conversation,’ you say? As someone you put at death’s door, I can’t say I was up for it at the time.”

“Put at death’s door? By *Shion*?” Inukashi suddenly bounded forward to join them. It seemed they had concluded that there was no danger.

“Yes. In the blink of an eye, he was behind me and choking me out,” said Sasori, putting a large finger to his neck. “If Nezumi hadn’t stopped him, I most certainly would have died.”

“Huh? *Shion* choked you? *Nezumi* stopped him? What the hell?”

Turning to Inukashi, Shion shook his head vigorously. “Ah, no, um, things just so happened to end up that way thanks to a misunderstanding, and….”

“I’m not sure how I’d feel if I *just so happened* to end up dead thanks to a misunderstanding.” Sasori gave a small chuckle. It was the second time Shion had

seen him smile, and it was warmer than the first. “Regardless of what may have happened, my gratitude towards you will not waver. You have laid the foundation for our way of life in the forest, and my only wish is for us to maintain it as it is, under our own power.”

“Of course, I understand,” said Shion. “The Mao Forest and No.6 may exist side by side, but they will not become one, and will be recognized as completely separate entities. I’ll expedite that documentation of mutual agreement and ensure that we will never invade or infringe upon your rights ever again.”

We must ensure that the Mao Massacre is never repeated, he thought. *We must ensure that we sever ourselves from hatred.*

“Ah, Sasori—what about this mouse…?” he asked.

“It’s yours,” Sasori said. “Treat it well, just as you did its predecessor.”

“Wow, really? Are you sure about this?”

“That’s irrelevant, as my only duty was to look after it,” said Sasori. “I was entrusted to pass it along to you should you ever come here.”

“Entrusted…? By who?”

Sasori blinked.

Why ask about the obvious? read his expression, and Shion could see even a hint of bewilderment in it.

“By Nezumi,” said Sasori. “Knowing that you’d surely come to the forest to bury your mouse when it died, he asked me to give you a new one when you did.”

“*Nezumi* did….”

“He did,” said Sasori. “I knew it was you the moment you entered the forest, although I hadn’t expected you to come so soon. In any case, I’ve now fulfilled this request made of me, Shion, so I shall take my leave. Come by any time—you will always be especially welcome. The light outside the forest is too bright for our eyes, though. This area is as far as we can go,

and I’m sure it’s impossible for you to venture any deeper, either. Even so, I pray we will meet again.”

As if avoiding the patches of sunlight filtering through the trees, Sasori retreated back into the thicket and disappeared.

"Ah, Sasori, wait up!” Shion cried out. “When did Nezumi ask this of you? What do you mean by 'so soon?'"

"Shion, let's go." Inukashi tugged on Shion’s arm, causing his wound from yesterday to throb. “It’s gonna be pitch-black once the sun sets, and that’s gonna be bad. Like, really bad. So let's get outta here, quick! C’mon, quit wasting time already.”

Inukashi kept pulling on his arm without restraint. Shion finally gave in, saying, “Alright, I get it already. I’ll go.”

Inukashi let out a small huff. "Honestly, this place ain’t any good, and neither was he. With that kinda guy as chief, I'm glad *I* wasn't born a Forest person." Inukashi's gaze flashed briefly to Shion's profile. “Man, I’m starving. Wish we brought

sandwiches, but, well, whatever. I'm sure Mama Karan will make us a bunch, right? I can't wait. If there are any leftovers, you think I could take some home? Actually, I'm sure it's fine if I do, and honestly, even if you said no, I'd bring some home anyway. Hey, Shion, what's with the long face? Dunno if something's bugging you, but put on a smile, why don't ya? You'll brighten up this gloom, and...."

"Inukashi. You're chatty today," said Shion.

Inukashi shut their mouth, their lips drawn into a taut line.

One tends to talk excessively, it seems, when truth hides on the backside of the tongue.

"You're hiding something." Shion stared closely at their tightly shut mouth. "What are you hiding, Inukashi? Answer me."

"Shut the hell up!" Yelling, Inukashi balled both hands into fists. "Shut up, shut *up*! You wanna know what I'm hiding? I'm hiding as many things as there are stars in the sky! Why should I have to lay 'em all out to you one by one? You think you're all

that, dumbass? But…ugh. If you wanna know, then fine, I'll tell you. I know Getsuyaku 'cause I saw him die in front of me with my own two eyes. Was it in his chest or his head…? No, his chest—he was shot right in the chest. They killed him like it was nothing."

"What…?"

"He had a job doing garbage disposal in the Correctional Facility. I used him to pull a few tricks to allow you guys to escape. Nezumi gave me precise instructions for it, and it went well, for the most part. But at the very end, I made one mistake. It… slipped my mind to warn Getsuyaku to escape. It didn't occur to me at all—I hadn't thought that far. And so, he didn't get out in time, and they shot him down."

"…So that's what happened," said Shion. "We played a big part in it, didn't we?"

"Don't get me wrong." Inukashi raised their chin. "I'm not plagued by my conscience or haunted by regret, got it? Not one bit. You can't live if you're all hung up on shit like that. I mean, who

knows if Getsuyaku would've made it even if I *had* told him Nezumi's order to escape? You think I can beat myself up like that every single time someone dies? No way in hell! I don't have the time for that."

Shion understood. He understood that Inukashi had acted in order to save them, and also that to allow one's heart to dwell on each and every one of the immeasurable number of individual lives lost would only shatter that heart into pieces. That was precisely why he had committed it all to memory. The past, the history, the evidence that every soul they had lost had once lived—he engraved it all into his mind. Without distortion, without embellishment, without any falsification, he would preserve for posterity the memory of Getsuyaku; the image of No.6 in ruins; all those who had died cruelly underground; and what he and the others had done, and hadn't done. Just as Safu and everyone else had entrusted this to him, he would in turn entrust it all to the people of future generations.

Right now, Shion had no other way to pass

on this responsibility.

"But, y'know…I'd…always considered myself a victim, you see," said Inukashi. "That I was a sacrifice, endlessly abused by the demon named No.6. I wasn't wrong to think that way, right?"

"Right."

"But then…I realized that I might also not be all that guilt-free myself. When it comes to Getsuyaku, I…even *I* might have some blood on my hands, too. It's not a big deal, though. I ain't been losing sleep or my appetite over it or anything…. I just feel a tiny bit bad about it. 'Cause of that little girl, Lili."

I just feel a tiny bit bad.

Those turbulent emotions felt more painful than expected.

Shion opened up his fingers. The feeling that lingered in his palm was from the time he had pulled the trigger on that gun.

I killed someone with this hand.

That wasn't simply emotional turbulence—it was a vividly raw memory, and a vividly raw transgression. *Bear the weight of that on your back. Take that weight and live on with it*, Nezumi had said.

Shion would live on, bearing that weight all the while.

"If you and Rikiga-san hadn't saved us, we wouldn't have been able to escape from the Correctional Facility," said Shion. "Trapped inside, we would have been crushed under the building, or burned to death in the fire."

"...So what? Tryna comfort me, huh? Heh, I'm not so silly and naive as that," said Inukashi. "Saving you two and the mistake of forgetting to warn Getsuyaku are two completely different things. One doesn't cancel the other out. 'Course, just because they don't cancel out doesn't mean I feel guilty or anything. Troublesome shit like that—I shake it all off."

"It's the truth," said Shion. "Inukashi, I'm speaking the truth."

Inukashi's gaze turned away. "What you're saying is way too complicated; it’s flyin’ over my head. But whatever, man. Two years ago and now, even—you both still piss me off. Maybe the two of you really *should* have been flattened into pancakes or burnt to a crisp back then—life would be *way* easier for me now.”

“Hey, Inukashi—"

Inukashi ran a hand back through their long hair. "I'm not feelin’ it anymore. I'm gonna call it a day and go get little Shion, get sandwiches from Mama Karan, and go home. They’re gonna taste way better if I eat ‘em alone rather than while staring at your complicated face. I'll come by again tomorrow for dog training, so you better be grateful. Later, Shion."

Without waiting for his reply, Inukashi rushed off. They were quick, and in the blink of an eye, were gone from Shion’s vision.

Shion clenched his fist over his chest. Steadying his breath, he took a step forward.

⁂

He took a book from the shelf. It was a drama written decades ago, a story about a woman losing her youth and a man who had already grown old falling into a love akin to madness.

To love is to be mad. Any sane love isn't love at all—just a cheap imitation.

That's a scary thing, isn't it? But we can't go back now. No—I don't want to go back.

The open page was covered in the man and woman's dialogue.

⁂

Nezumi closed the book and returned it to its place. Then, he tried drawing a finger along the table next to him.

It was clean.

It wasn’t just the table—there wasn't a speck of dust on the bookshelf or the stairs, either.

He sat down on the sofa and lit the lamp. The two brown mice began to frolic about, cheeping back and forth in delight.

"What is it? That excited, huh?“

The mice that Shion had named Hamlet and Cravat—these two mice were their children. Their parents were in the Mao Forest, left in the care of the Forest People. They were both in their twilight years—they would likely leave this world before long, and Nezumi had decided that if they were approaching their end, then they would meet it there in the Mao Forest, under the watchful eyes of the Forest People.

It was a land of trees and grass and wind. Frankly speaking, he had been surprised when he had first set foot within it. He had anticipated it being in a much more devastated state, perhaps with artificial interference, managed formally like a Forest Park, and veiled in No.6's stench—such unabashed devastation was what he had prepared himself to face.

He had been wrong, however. There hadn't

been a hint of No.6's stench, nor were there any paved paths for the convenience of visitors. The trees were nearly savage in their wild growth, and the wind roared as it passed through their leaves. It was the Mao Forest of Nezumi's memory, and on top of that, it was clearly expanding northward in a way it hadn't before its destruction. The former No.6 had preserved the Mao Forest—although only a small portion of it—because it was land related to Elyurias. Ostensibly, it had been for research purposes, but even then it wasn't necessary for the No.6 of the present. Surely the city could have transformed it into a pseudo-natural forest for citizens to enjoy.

Instead, the forest stood boldly as if in a rejection of people, and was wholly untamed in its existence.

"We owe this all to Shion. He exhausted every possible means to revitalize the forest," Sasori had said, bowing his head as if thanking the person that wasn't there.

Sasori, of all people, had voiced his heartfelt gratitude.

Pretty impressive, Shion, Nezumi thought. *You've far surpassed my limited powers of imagination. To think that you've accomplished this much....*

Nezumi's ears picked up the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs—a furtive, cautious tread. The door opened slowly, and the flame of the lamp wavered faintly in response. "Inukashi, huh? Come to bring me dinner, did you?“

Closing the door behind them, Inukashi set a wicker basket on the table. “Yeah. It’s dinner time.” Upon removing the cloth, a lush color and fragrance spread in all directions. "Mama Karan's sandwiches and fried fish, with fruit and veggies as sides.”

“Yet another sumptuous feast, that. First-rate room service, I must say.“

"Service? Fuck off. I’m charging you two silver for it.”

“That’s a little strange, isn’t it?” said Nezumi. “Karan originally *gave* it to you, and now you’re demanding an entire two

coins for it? Why, you've become quite the cutthroat dealer.”

"Shut your trap. I don't wanna be called cutthroat by a guy who sneaks into people's houses and chokes ‘em from behind."

"I didn't *choke* you; I only covered your mouth. I couldn’t have you making a fuss, you see. Even your dogs were so kind as to remember me and stayed good and quiet.”

"Don't you say shit about my dogs. It feels awful.” Inukashi pressed a hand lightly to their chest.

"What’s the matter, Inukashi? Seems like not only do you feel awful, but your *temper* is, too.”

“Temper? How can my temper be anything but nasty when you’re here in front of me?” said Inukashi. “It's the worst feeling *ever*, ‘specially when I've been able to live in peace for these two years without you hanging around. Seriously, nothing could be worse than this god-awful feeling.“

They sat on the sofa and let out a long sigh, their back hunched like a tired old matron. “Nah, that’s a lie.” Their voice was slightly hoarse. “That’s not the whole truth, Nezumi. It’s not like I’m *glad* you’re back—that’d be crazy talk—but I don’t feel completely terrible about it, either. Part of me wants to give your shoulder a good smack and tell ya it’s good to see you doin’ well.”

“And yet you’re in a bad mood, you say.” Nezumi took a bunch of grapes from the basket. He ate just one, but a generous amount of juice filled his mouth, tart and sweet.

“Look, I don't like deceiving Shion." Inukashi’s tone was strangely wan.

Nezumi gave their brown-skinned profile a pointed look. “But we’re not deceiving him, are we?”

“There’s no difference—I’m hiding the fact that you’re here. I haven’t said a word about it even though I *know*…. That’s the same thing as deceiving—no, *betraying* Shion, and I don’t wanna betray him.”

Nezumi popped another grape into his mouth. “What happened, Inukashi? Within just two years, you’ve learned to use such awfully admirable lines. I would never have imagined something like *that* coming out of your mouth, back then.”

“Yeah, yeah, say whatever you want!” said Inukashi. “I just…I realized that Shion has never once deceived or betrayed me, so, I thought…I wanna do the same for him.”

The grapes’ refreshing sweetness was fading, and bitterness coated the tip of Nezumi’s tongue.

Well, there it is, he thought, and the bitterness threatened to overwhelm.

Inukashi and Sasori equated goodness and virtue with Shion, and were drawn to him —as if he had lured them in. They devoted their hearts to him, without a hint of doubt.

He’s not as simple as you think, Inukashi.

It was like a switch could go off with Shion, sometimes—beneath his gentle

appearance lurked a hidden abnormality.

I witnessed it time and time again, and it scares me, Nezumi thought. *I'm afraid….*

Abruptly, Inukashi stood up. "So what are you planning to do? He was attacked, and *you* knew about it."

"I didn't *know* about it; I merely thought it might be a possibility."

"'Merely?' 'Possibility?' Cut the crap, already. Don't look so indifferent, you dumbass! His life was in *danger*. He almost *died*, and yet, you didn't even…." Heaving in a breath with their shoulders, Inukashi shook their head. "…Is this fine with you? Are you really alright like this, with not seeing him? Are you *really* okay with that?"

"Well, I wonder…."

Am I fine with not meeting him? he thought. *Am I alright not seeing him? Will I be okay? Can I endure it?*

I wonder, now.

A cool wind caressed his cheeks—the door had opened.

“…Shion.” Inukashi swallowed, their voice even hoarser than before.

Face unreadable, Shion entered the room. The black dog followed after, glancing up at Inukashi before laying down leisurely by the door.

I didn’t sense any of it, Nezumi thought. *Not his footsteps, not his presence, and not even the door opening.*

I *didn’t.*

Nezumi bit his lip. There was the faint taste of grapes.

Inukashi cast about with their black eyes. Voice still hoarse, they asked, "How...why are you here?"

"Because of what you said,” said Shion. “That we *both* still piss you off. So, I knew that there was someone besides me making you feel that way."

Nezumi returned the bunch of grapes to

the basket, and let out a chuckle. “Inukashi, we’ve got a talented detective here, and you screwed up big-time right in front of him. You’ve got some self-reflection to do.” Taking a step forward, he held out his right hand. "Long time no see, Shion. Anything new with you?"

"I'm getting by, thank you. I'm glad you seem to be doing well."

Gently, Shion took his hand. Without letting go or averting his gaze from Nezumi, he called out. "Inukashi."

"Huh? I mean, yes? Wait, I mean—w-whaddaya want?”

"I'm sorry, but could you let us be alone? I’ve got something I want to talk to Nezumi about.”

“Erm, sure. ‘Course I can,” said Inukashi. “Nothing to be sorry for; I wouldn’t wanna stay here even if ya asked me to. So I’ll, uh, get going, then. Nezumi, you owe me later for dinner. Anyway, see ya.”

They whispered something to the black dog before practically stumbling out of the room. The door shut with a click.

“Letting go of my hand any time soon, Shion?” said Nezumi. “You’re not supposed to hold on forever when you shake someone’s hand.”

“I remember the steps,” said Shion.

"What?"

"The steps to the dance you taught me in this very room. I remember each and every one of them.”

“What, you want me to test you on them?”

"No, I just want to dance with you.”

For a heartbeat, Nezumi hesitated.

A dance? Right here and now?

The moment passed, however, and Nezumi wrapped his arm around Shion's waist. He began to hum a melody. From Shion’s shirt pocket, a black mouse leapt out and curled up with the other mice on the sofa.

⁂

Pausing halfway up the stairs, Inukashi looked back at the door they had bolted out of.

Was it really okay? Would it be alright to leave those two alone together?

Long time no see and *I’m glad you seem to be doing well*, those two had said. The hell was up with that? How ominous. So terribly *ominous* that it made Inukashi want to hurl. They had ordered the dog to alert them if anything happened—but what exactly did “anything” even mean?

What am I worried about?

"What do I know?" Inukashi whispered aloud.

What *did* they know? It was none of their business whether those two shook hands, killed or kissed each other, or slept together, even. It was absolutely none of Inukashi's business.

Let's go home. Little Shion's waiting for me.

⁂

"You cheater," Shion said, breathing hard. "Changing the steps mid-dance is *cheating*."

“Well, color me offended. You may have mastered the old steps perfectly, but here I am doing you the favor of teaching you

something new. Ready to admit defeat, then? Or shall we continue?"

"I want to continue, but...my breath won't cooperate."

“I’ve told you that dancing is a full-body workout, haven’t I? That’s just how it is—you need to be in shape.”

Shion's arms wound around his body. "Nezumi."

His flushed body pressed up hard against Nezumi. Nezumi could feel the heat of him and the racing of his heart.

"I missed you. I've been waiting for you all this time."

"...Shion."

"I've been waiting all this time. I’ve been waiting for you, and you alone.”

Why, Shion? Nezumi thought. *Why do you voice your feelings so unguardedly? How* can *you even do that?*

“I made a promise with you. How could I

break it?” he said.

“You mean that’s the reason you came back?” Shion slowly unwound his arms from him, and all of that warmth faded away along with them. His eyes were cool and dispassionate. "Nezumi.... Why did you come back? What's the real reason you returned to No.6?"

Nezumi wasn't Inukashi, but he wanted to heave a long sigh all the same. “So that’s what you want to know, hm?“

“Yeah, it is,” Shion said. “I can't imagine you taking action without a reason. That’s how you’ve always been—what you do always, *always* has a reason and a purpose. To the extent of my knowledge, you've never once gone into a situation blind."

“What, can't accept that I came back for your sake?" Grabbing Shion’s arm, Nezumi pulled him close. Shion had intentionally created distance between them, but Nezumi broke it down by force.

"Nezumi."

“Behave yourself.” Stealing away Shion's freedom with a tight embrace, Nezumi whispered in his ear. "Listen, Shion. It's starting again."

As if coming to an understanding, Shion’s body tensed within his arms.

"Destruction is trying to start up again. Very soon."

And that's why I came back.

The lamp's flame burned. Shion trembled slightly.

Chapter 4: Act II, Scene 1

"I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell."
- *Macbeth*, Act II Scene 1, by William Shakespeare

⁂

Karan poured coffee into her cup.

Decorating the cup were a number of fluttering blue butterflies, set against a white backdrop. The design had been to her taste, and so she had bought it—decades ago, now, since the cup was a little older than Shion. It hadn't been that expensive, nor had she treated it with particular care, but even so, the blue butterfly cup had always stayed comfortingly at her side, with not a chip or a crack.

Breathing in the scent of coffee, Karan turned her gaze out the window.

Night was on its way. Earlier, Renka had bought the last three muffins—Karan had insisted that she was already closing up shop and so didn't need the money, but Renka had shaken her head and handed over enough to pay for them anyway.

"I know that these aren't leftover stock, Karan, but ones you set aside especially for us—for Lili, little Getsuyaku, and I." Taking a step forward, Renka embraced her. "Thank you, Karan. Just knowing you have us in your heart means more than you can imagine. It makes me feel like I can keep on going."

"Renka…" Karan started to say.

"Really, I'm so truly grateful to you," Renka continued, "but I can't be spoiled by your generosity forever. That's not the kind of motherhood I want to model for Lili. So, please—let me at least pay for these."

Gazing at Renka, Karan acquiesced.

Something she had come to realize, having lived as long as she had,

was that on rare occasions, kindness and charity could hurt someone just as much as abuse and violence. Of course, just as rare were adults who knew how to draw the line between charity and imposition, or between kindness and pity—most people, Karan included, muddled it all up into a mess.

“Well then, your patronage is much appreciated,” she said, taking the coins. “Thank you for always buying my muffins, Renka.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “What wonderful luck to have a delicious bakery like yours so close by! I’ve recently had a little extra room in my budget, too—I’m so glad my salary has started to come in properly. I also get a subsidy from the city for the children, and it’s really been a help.”

Renka was currently working at a medical facility in the city, and while it didn’t pay much, it seemed to be just enough for a single mother and two children to live on.

No.6 had once seemed to have turned to nothing but rubble, but it was already trying to return to its old self with considerable speed…. No, not its old self—it was trying to be made anew.

“What an amazing son you have, Karan,” said Renka. “In the blink of an eye, he restored order from all that chaos, and stabilized all our livelihoods. Chronos and Lost Town are nothing more than place names, now, and all us citizens have equality and freedom, no matter who we are. We have libraries and theaters; why, we even have symphony halls! People are free to dance and sing as they like, and we can openly discuss our feelings and opinions. We can speak truth from our hearts—we don’t have to lie anymore. It all feels so much like a dream; it’s really, truly incredible.”

Renka wasn’t the only one who felt this way—Karan frequently encountered people who sang Shion’s praises to the same tune. Every time someone praised her son, Karan would shake her head emphatically, insisting, “Oh, no, it’s not quite like that. Those accomplishments are due to the work of the Restructural Committee as a whole, not just Shion.”

Shion wasn’t the sole person responsible for everything, nor was it all the fruit of only his labor. He had played a significant role, of course, due to his position at the head of the Restructural

Committee, but nothing could begin, proceed, or advance with just the head alone. They had only been able to come as far as they had because of the Restructural Committee as an *organization* in its entirety—because of the precise, proper work of each individual in their respective positions in the city's administration.

Shion understood this more intimately than anyone, and Karan had done her best to understand it, too.

Even so, people lavished praise upon him: *Your son is amazing. How laudable of him. What a genius he is! He's so impressive! His abilities are incredible. He's truly the leader of this new age. His youth means he can continue to guide us for ages to come. He's the reason for No.6's stability! A toast to No.6—to the city of our leader and of us!*

Karan may have been the mother of the Restructural Committee's chairman, but she continued to run her bakery without leaning on her son's status, and some people even went so far as to praise *her* for it.

It gave her the chills. The resemblance of all this to a cult of hero worship was…uncanny, and a cold sweat ran down her back at the thought.

Just as utopia was impossible in reality, nowhere did there exist any one person who could fix the world's problems all on their own. Did people not remember that they had once revered No.6 as an ideal city-state, as a singularly unique and holy city? Did they not vividly remember how that had played out for them, in the end?

Had they no awareness in the very cores of their beings of how terrifyingly foolish it was to revere, praise, and accept a state, an individual, or any other thing in their entirety, to cast aside their complaints and doubts to simply sing its praises instead?

Was she just overthinking it?

After Renka left, Karan closed the shop and poured herself a cup of coffee, savoring the deep bitterness of its flavor. She then let out a sigh.

She was just overthinking it. *All these worries are unfounded—my son isn't so foolish that he'd want people to raise him to a seat of authority.*

Karan sighed again.

It occurred to her then—she trembled not because of her son, but because of the people who might try to elevate him to power.

Would they mold him into another target of their worship, growing fanatic? Would they accept anything he said or did, without thinking to question him? Would No.6 repeat the mistakes of its past?

The very idea struck fear into her.

She shook her head. *No, it'll be okay. We aren't that foolish.*

Starting with Renka, she visualized one by one all the people she knew. Each one of them strove to do their best every day, working as hard as they could to build up their lives, facing forward with their feet set firmly upon the ground. Just as Renka had earlier, every individual held on tightly to their dignity.

Things were different from how they had been in the past, Karan told herself. People were no longer swept along so easily by the current—they didn't stop in their tracks when they felt fear.

Her emotions began to calm.

Sipping coffee from the blue butterfly cup, she looked around the room, which was sandwiched between the shop and the kitchen. The combined living room–kitchen area was narrow, but it was kept neat and tidy—Shion had always been an industrious cleaner, efficient at mopping the floors, wiping the window glass, and tidying up the table-top.

An untouched bowl of soup, a sandwich and a fried fish dish were together on the table right now, but the soup and fried fish had long gone cold. Two hours had passed since Shion had left without a word as to where he was going, taking only the black dog with him.

Shion, don't go, she thought. *Don't leave the house so soon after being attacked; isn't the sun just about to set? Please be a little more careful—at least for my sake. You'll take years off your mother's lifespan from worry.*

In the end, she hadn't admonished or scolded him such—she knew that even if she had tried to stop him, it would have been to no effect. Shion's face had been very tense, as if he were yearning for something with all his heart. She could tell with a glance that her words wouldn't have reached him, no matter what she said.

He was one who would follow wherever his heart took him—that was simply her son's nature.

He paid attention to his surroundings and was considerate of others. His past two years of accomplishments spoke volumes about his management abilities, as well as his keen judgement and thoughtful decision-making. As his mother, she was so proud of him.

Even so, she bit her lip. Shion always followed his heart. Even if he didn't know the right way forward until the very last moment, he would come to a breakthrough in the end. He followed his feelings faithfully—if someone entrusted him with a wish or hope and he had resolved to see it through, then surely he would expend all his power in doing so. In fact, he had actually already done so, as that resolve was something he himself had chosen to take up. Once Shion had made up his mind, he would never second-guess the person by whom he had been entrusted, and no matter what happened, he would let his heart lead him.

Karan saw all of that in Shion's eyes just before he left, wearing an expression he rarely ever let show. Where had her child been headed, and what was he trying to do?

Inukashi had arrived just before him, and saying they realized they had an urgent errand, they had taken the sandwiches and fried fish and gone home. Their face had been uncharacteristically sullen, and Karan had asked if they had perhaps fought with Shion.

"I'm not immature enough to pick a fight with that guy," Inukashi had said with a backwards glance at her, but she thought they had sounded decidedly bad-tempered. After some time had passed, Shion had come back, but hardly had he told her he'd be out for a bit again before he was out the door once more. It seemed likely he was going to the former West Block, perhaps in pursuit of Inukashi, but if so, why?

Setting down her coffee cup, Karan's gaze fell to the small box on top of the chair—the box she had placed Tsukiyo in when he had breathed his last. Earlier, Shion had said he had gone out to bury Tsukiyo, but had come home with a black mouse hidden in his pocket that was Tsukiyo's spitting image.

Nezumi….

Karan's heart went out to the black-haired boy.

⁂

"Perhaps…cherry cake, then," said Nezumi. "I'd like to eat your cherry cake one more time."

It had been the day before Nezumi left No.6, but at the time, he had yet to mention his intent to depart the very next day.

Even so, she had somehow sensed it.

This boy—he'll soon vanish before our eyes.

"Nezumi, dear, is there any food you have a hankering for? If you have any requests, I'll make them for you—cravats, muffins, anything at all!"

She hadn't meant that offer as a farewell gift for him. Shion had blessed her by recounting how he and Nezumi had lived closely supporting each other, and how they had protected each others' lives. Of course, he hadn't told her everything—it had likely only been a small part of the whole.

Thank you for being at my son's side.

She felt as if she were full to bursting with gratitude towards him, but it also seemed like something would be lost by expressing that feeling in words. None felt quite right; none quite hit the mark. Perhaps it was that she felt there was no room for her to fit between the two of them. With that came an inkling—an inkling that she might understand her son's heart and how drawn to this boy it was, though she couldn't explain why. Even so, she understood.

It was for those reasons that her offer to Nezumi wasn't a farewell gift—she simply wanted to treat him with kindness. She couldn't fight, destroy, or create the way Shion and Nezumi could—all she could do was make bread, cakes, and the like. She did believe, however, that she could comfort others through a slice of bread or piece of cake that she had baked herself, even if only a little, and she wanted to leave Nezumi with something tangible with which she could convey her gratitude.

She wanted to offer what comfort she could to this boy who intended to leave, and Nezumi wanted cherry cake.

Nezumi gave a small smile, then. "Your cherry cake was the best thing I've eaten in my entire life—nothing else has even come close since. I'd be delighted to have it one more time, if I could."

"Have you had my cherry cake before, then?"

"Just once." Nezumi's gaze shifted upward to the ceiling, though not towards anything in particular. "It was such a shock to me that something that delicious could exist in real life. I couldn't believe it then, and I *still* can't believe it, now that I think about it. Everything about that night, really, had seemed so miraculous and unreal."

Most of what he said had been a murmur, but his deep, beautiful voice reached Karan's ears nonetheless.

"That night…." repeated Karan. She had made cherry cake many times in her life, whether as cupcakes, pound cake, no-bake cheesecake, or something else…. It was a yearly tradition to make it for Shion's birthday, too, and she would sometimes line it up in her shop's display case to sell. Which one of those was Nezumi praising? On which night had he tasted it? If it had been four years ago…then something, perhaps, came to mind.

But she didn't ask about it.

Let's talk about today, not the past, she thought, and instead said, "Cherry cake is really a dessert meant for early summer, as cherries need to be in season. Unfortunately, I would have to use canned cherries if I made it now."

"That's fine by me. The first time I had it wasn't in the early

summer, either."

"Oh? Well then, let's have cherry cake for dessert tonight," said Karan. "Look forward to it!"

"Really? Thanks, Karan." Nezumi suddenly broke out into a boyish smile, every inch of it bright, unguarded, and without a care in the world.

"Oh, but don't get too excited, though," Karan said. "It's homemade, of course, so the flavor won't be exactly the same. I do wonder if I can come close to the one you called the best you'd ever had? …Honestly, I'm a little daunted!"

"I'm well aware I can't taste the same thing more than once," Nezumi said, "but I have high hopes that it'll be delicious enough to be at least second-best."

"My, you've a mind to run me hard!"

"I would never," Nezumi said. "I'm not so full of myself that I would even think of trying something so outrageous—I know perfectly well how magnificent you are."

"Why, you exaggerate too much for flattery, and that's not very funny as a joke, Nezumi."

"I'm one hundred percent serious, though. Even in the midst of all that chaos, you continued to bake bread and line it up on display in your shop to sell. You held on tightly to your daily life, and so unwaveringly, too—I never imagined that there existed a person capable of such a thing," Nezumi declared. "Karan—you are undoubtedly the toughest, most composed, and magnificent individual I've ever had the privilege of meeting."

Karan blushed. How long had it been since she last was showered in so much earnest praise? "Thank you," she said. "It warms my heart to be complimented so sincerely. Nezumi, may I kiss your cheek?"

"Of course." Nezumi leaned down to accept Karan's kiss as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

That night, Karan made no-bake cherry cheesecake. Cutting it into

generous slices, she placed it in front of Shion and Nezumi. For a moment, they shared a glance with each other, then picked up their forks almost simultaneously.

“Absolutely *delicious*. This is exactly how it tasted,” Nezumi said with a nod, sounding satisfied.

“Delicious enough to be second-best?” Karan asked.

In response to her question, Nezumi nodded again. “Exceedingly.”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?” asked Shion. “If this one’s second-best, which was first…. —Oh.” Still holding his fork, Shion gazed at Nezumi. “Right, you mean *that* cake?”

“Yeah, the best one in the world—I’ll remember how good it tasted for as long as I live.”

“And tonight’s dinner was even stew, too,” Shion remarked.

“It was indeed,” Nezumi agreed. “Nothing goes better together than stew and cherry cake.”

Shion laughed lightly, a gentle smile on his face. “Even though you ate it in the pitch-dark.”

“I’ll repeat myself as many times as I need to,” Nezumi said, “but nothing will ever come *close*, lights on or otherwise.”

Keeping quiet, Karan listened to their back-and-forth. She had no intention in the least of butting into a conversation only the two of them could follow. Her son likely shared countless things she couldn’t even imagine with this boy, not just cherry cake. He might be the only one, in fact, that her son shared those things with at all.

What would happen, then, if this companion of her son’s were to disappear?

She felt Nezumi’s eyes on her, but she couldn’t help but look away.

“Shion,” she said. “Would you bring Inukashi the remaining half of the cake tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure thing. Inukashi’ll be thrilled,” said Shion.

Nezumi clicked his tongue. “No need to go spoiling them like that; this is *Inukashi* we’re talking about. They’ll catch the faintest whiff of cake and come running over without you having to bother finding them.”

“That’s impossible even for Inukashi’s nose, I think,” said Shion.

“Then have Tsukiyo take a note. Just write ‘Have cherry cake. Come get it,’ and they’ll hightail it here within the hour. It’s a shame to give them an entire half, though—Karan, could you leave me some for breakfast tomorrow? …Yeah, that much is perfect.”

“Cake first thing in the morning? I can already feel the heartburn,” Shion said, rubbing his chest.

Nezumi half-shrugged his right shoulder. “Who knows when I’ll get to have some again? You can’t blame me for being a little greedy.”

Mid-slice, Karan’s hand stopped cutting the cake.

If you like it that much, I’ll make it for you anytime at all, she thought, but bit it back—the sentiment was nothing more than a few empty words.

Shion let out a quiet sigh. “So you’re leaving?”

“Yeah,” Nezumi said. “My wounds have mostly healed by now; it’s about time I went on my way.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

Raising her head, Karan looked at Nezumi, then at Shion.

“Really? That’s so soon,” Shion said. “But, well, it looks like it’ll be clear skies tomorrow, so….”

“Yeah, it’ll be a fine day to set out on a journey.”

Under the pretense of taking away the cake dish, Karan retreated to the kitchen—she couldn't bear to keep looking at Shion like that. She tried closing her eyes, but nothing appeared behind them. Nezumi had so casually let Shion know of his cruel intent to leave him, and it was beyond her words or power to keep someone like that here.

Magnificent and tough and composed? What nonsense; I'm nothing like that. I can't even look my son in the eye—that's just how weak and pathetic I really am.

She clenched her hand into a fist.

The next morning, Karan made muffins and a spread of various breads for Nezumi. With words of gratitude, he departed, and she saw off his retreating back.

He might not come back, she thought—not of Nezumi, but her son, who had left to accompany him as far as the edge of the West Block.

My child might go with him.

She pressed a palm to her chest with all her strength, and felt her heartbeat racing wildly. She was feeling somewhat scattered, she realized, but beneath those chaotic emotions dwelled a faint relief.

If Shion had his heart set somewhere, then, from the depths of her soul, that was where Karan wanted him to live his life—she didn't want him to ever lose that place of his.

Karan's life was here, in a little bakery in a small corner of Lost Town in No.6. Every morning, she would stack bags of flour, and a delivery of eggs and milk would arrive from a local farmer. The air would grow suffused with the scent of baking bread, and, as if enticed by it, people would come in one after the other to buy it by the loaf.

Karan wanted to live here forever—rather, she *would* live here forever. She was determined to protect this daily life of hers, without cowering in fear or being rocked by the current.

Shion, however, was different. Karan guessed he might choose to live somewhere apart from her, and if the place he chose was at the side of that boy, then she would accept it.

Shion, darling, your mother loves you enough to let you go.

I won't tie you down to me—I'll give you all the freedom in the world. That's how much I love you.

Shion, however, had come home in the end. He became a member of the Restructural Committee, was elected Chairman, and now oversaw No.6's reconstruction and rebirth.

There had been ups and downs, of course, but for the past two years, Shion and Karan had continued to live together as mother and son.

⁂

Breathing in the scent of the coffee, Karan lifted the cup and took a sip. The flavor seemed stronger and more bitter than it had been earlier.

Shion was pushing himself too hard—she had always felt that to be the case.

He had chosen to stay somewhere other than where he longed to be, and it forced him to push himself past his already-exceeded limits in a miserable, grueling cycle.

How, then, could he be saved from it? How could he be set free?

Just like two years ago, nothing came to Karan's mind.

There's nothing I can do to save him.

Drinking the last of her coffee, Karan tried to set the cup down on the table, only for it to slip from her fingers. It fell straight to the floor and shattered with a splintering crash.

"Oh, dear me!" She let out a small instinctive cry. She couldn't help but talk to herself as she crouched down to collect the pieces. "Oh

my goodness, how could this happen?"

Some of the blue butterflies were broken in half, and others were in tiny unsalvageable pieces.

She felt not sadness, then, but rather a sense of isolated loneliness, not unlike the death of an old acquaintance.

Once she had all the fragments more or less gathered up, she bundled them up in a paper towel. The next steps, then, were to vacuum up the remainder, mop the floor for good measure, and….

A boom resounded.

It sounded like a faraway explosion. While the boom itself hadn't been that loud, she instantly felt its reverberations run up her legs, and outside, she could hear a sudden clamor.

Just what had happened?

She opened the door to her shop and stepped outside. Out on the road was a gathering of people, all neighbors with familiar faces.

"Ah, Karan! Did you hear the noise just now?" asked a thin girl, looking over her shoulder at Karan. Her name was Kuga, and she owned a small flower shop nearby. Sometimes, Karan would trade leftover bread for flowers with her, and there had even been occasions when Kuga had taught her flower arranging, simple wreath-making, and how to make cut flowers last a long time.

"I did," said Karan. "That's why I ran out—what's going on?"

"I don't know, but, look! The sky to the east is all red!"

At Kuga's words, Karan looked at the night sky and saw that it was tinged with scarlet, and she could hear a distant cacophony of echoing sirens from firetrucks and ambulances.

"Is it a fire? Was there some kind of explosion somewhere?" Karan asked.

"Well, as I said, I don't know," Kuga said. "But it's an incident of

some kind, for sure. Wonder if there are factories or something in that area working with flammable materials? I can't really think of any other explanation. Our landlord did go to check it out—I tried to stop him, but he just rushed out! He was mostly just curious, though. Even so, I hope it's nothing serious."

"I hope so, too…."

Kuga gave a light yawn and waved a hand at Karan, seeming to have already lost interest. "Later, Karan. I'll let you know if I find out anything after my landlord comes back."

"Thank you, I really appreciate that. Good night, Kuga."

Once more, Karan looked back up at the sky. Her heart raced, an ominous premonition in her chest—the red-tinged sky felt like bad luck. If the incident was in the east, though, then at the very least it was unlikely Shion would be caught up in it. After all, he had surely set off to the west, in the direction of the old West Block….

The night sky had slowly grown dark again while she had lingered—the explosion might not have been all that large. People were turning in for the night, returning to their respective homes; the night air was a trifle chilly to be standing outside for so long, and Karan began to make her way home too.

Then, she felt a sudden chill. A prickling sensation ran faintly down her neck—an intangible one; she hadn't been stung or grazed.

Was it someone's eyes on her she felt? Was she being watched?

Pressing her hand to her neck, Karan looked behind her.

No one was there.

The road was dark, with only the sections illuminated by street-lamps floating pale above the gloom. Compared to the once luxurious neighborhood of Chronos, this part of town hadn't seen much progress when it came to infrastructure improvements—of course it wouldn't be nearly as dazzling and bright at night as it was during the day. Even so, Karan loved Lost Town's quiet, expansive darkness, although she had certainly feared the pitch dark when Shion had been attacked.

There was no one aside from her here along the dark road.

Had she just imagined it?

Rubbing her neck, Karan sighed for the umpteenth time that day.

No, surely it was just her imagination—she was simply more on-edge than she had thought, tired from endlessly overthinking everything. Placing a hand on her chest, Karan calmed her breathing.

Glancing absently at the sky, she saw a thin moon peek out as the clouds began to break.

⁂

"Destruction…" murmured Shion. Then, slowly, he pulled back.

Though the movement was gradual, he slipped easily from Nezumi's arms around him, and Nezumi drew in on himself slightly, as if suddenly enveloped by a chilly wind.

"Destruction," he repeated, more forcefully than before, like he were digesting the word's meaning. His eyebrows furrowed as if in careful consideration of what destruction could entail, and his gaze drifted across empty space before returning to Nezumi. "Will it come from within No.6, or will it be an attack from the outside—which is it?"

Both his eyes and intonation were dispassionate; Nezumi couldn't read his emotions.

Ah, so you've learned how to make such expressions, now?

As Nezumi had witnessed countless times with his own eyes, Shion could turn at the drop of a hat. This time, however, was different—those *eyes* of his were different. It wasn't that they lacked emotion; it was that Nezumi couldn't read what emotion was in them. They weren't the eyes of a madman, but of someone in control.

He shook his head. "I don't know. I presume it could come from

either."

"Quite the ambiguous answer, that. How unlike you."

Nezumi shrugged. "Like me, unlike me—that's an ambiguous assumption in and of itself. My point is, No.6 isn't as stable as it might seem from your vantage point up at the top. Listen…you're no better off right now than if you were standing on one leg atop a towering cliff."

"So what you're saying is that I shouldn't be surprised if it all comes crumbling down?"

"It's highly possible, at least to me."

"Nezumi—" Shion took a half step forward. "—what were you doing these past two years?"

"Hey now—so the interrogation begins, does it?"

"What were you doing, and where?" pressed Shion. "What did you see and hear? What kind of life were you living? Were you always wandering, or were there places where you lingered? Were you always on your own, or did you have any passing companions? Did you fall ill at any point? Did you run into trouble? Were you eating properly? Or did you live in unexpected comfort?"

"Shion…."

"I've been here this whole time," Shion continued. "I took up the burden of reality you told me to take, and I kept my eyes focused on the world you told me not to avert them from. I've been working on the reformation of No.6 this entire time. You left, but I stayed."

Nezumi nodded. Then, he looked into Shion's eyes, in which emotion seethed.

He couldn't put a name to those emotions, but they called to mind the rolling of waves on a brilliant blue sea, and he flinched back slightly—flinched from those eyes that could shift on a whim from stillness into movement, from composure into turbulent feeling. Those eyes, capable of changing their hue in an instant, roused feelings of nostalgia, and yet their depths were at the same time

completely unfamiliar.

“In just two short years, I never could have imagined it possible to make this much progress developing such a well-organized state, with a proper rule of law,” said Nezumi, candidly. “But there’s danger all around—for *you*, that is. I’m sure you’ve accounted for that level of danger in your calculations, but if it exceeds that level….”

“That’s not what I asked!” shouted Shion, and those brilliant blue waves rose and surged. He seized Nezumi by the collar. “I’m asking what you were doing and where you were these past two years. Answer me *properly*, Nezumi.”

If Nezumi had wanted to dodge, he would have. If he had wanted to swat aside Shion’s outstretched hand, he would have. But he didn’t resist.

He would accept every part of Shion.

He had returned here having made that decision, and when he had seen for himself the revitalization of the city, that resolve had further solidified.

Two years. In just two short years, did you really accomplish this much?

Just one misstep, and No.6 would have been completely destroyed, giving way at the roots and vanishing completely from existence—there had been a considerably high chance of that happening, or so Nezumi had thought.

Yet, No.6 had avoided that.

All that chaos had been calmed, law-based order had been established, and No.6 in its city-state form had been built up and refined.

There was still danger, of course—just like he had told Shion, No.6 was riddled with cracks inside and out. It was viscerally palpable to Nezumi just how great the risk of collapse was for No.6, and he had yet even to determine the true form that risk took. He had nothing definite he could say about it, and for that very reason, the danger ran both deep and wide to a terrifying degree.

They might, however, pull through yet. This new No.6 might just prove far more tough and tenacious than Nezumi's fears were.

The strength went out of Shion's grip. "…Sorry."

Just as Shion was about to pull away, Nezumi grabbed his wrist. "What are you apologizing for?"

"I made it all your fault again. I tried to pin everything on you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You said so yourself," said Shion. "That I made my choice—that I stayed behind in No.6 of my own will, and took up the burden of reality. *I* was the one who made this decision, who said that I

wouldn't avert my eyes from the world…. Even so, I blamed it all on you as if you had just run away. That's…." Shion looked down. "That's nothing but a false accusation. I'm pretty much just taking out my anger on you when you've done nothing to deserve it."

"But it's the truth, isn't it?"

"What?"

"I left No.6 and you stayed behind—that's the undeniable truth, Shion."

"It's not like you *ran away*, though."

"How would you know?"

Shion raised his head and stared right at Nezumi, an expression of his that Nezumi knew very well. Even while he was visibly confused, Shion's gaze remained direct and earnest.

"It might very well be exactly as you say," said Nezumi. "Back then…I had thought that had been the end of it all. When I saw that the wall dividing No.6 and the West Block had crumbled—and not just some of it, but completely—I thought it was all over. I know I've told you this before, but I had always lived desiring nothing but No.6's destruction...so when I met you, I had thought that maybe, that wish could become reality. To me, you were the ace up my sleeve. That was my true motive all along—I had used you to achieve my goal."

Tch. Internally, he clicked his tongue at himself. *What the hell am I going on about? What use is dredging up the past after all this time?* He hadn't come back to confess his sins and repent, nor any such selfish sentimentality.

Even so, the words wouldn't stop—he needed to convey the truth that he had left unsaid for two years.

"I had accomplished what I wanted," Nezumi said. "Everything had come to an end. So, I thought, there was no need or reason for me to be here, and it's not like there was anything else I wanted. But you, Shion—you create things. You can raise things up from one… no, from *zero*, even. I'm not capable of that—so even if I was at

your side, I thought, what would be the point? If No.6 were to be reborn as something new, that wouldn't be my stage to stand on."

Shion's lips moved a fraction, but not even a whisper came out.

"You're brilliant," Nezumi continued. "You played your part brilliantly. Or you'll continue to play it, rather, because the curtain is still raised—the second act is about to begin."

Act II, scene one: just where would it be set?

A town filled with people, living out their peaceful lives? Would it be in the midst of a riot? Or in an expanse of ruins, with no sign of life? The real show was about to begin, but there was no time to rehearse—and not even a script to follow.

"Shion." He tightened his fingers around Shion's wrist. "I've realized something."

He had realized something during these last two years: a truth so simple and clear, and yet he had needed a long time to arrive at it. *My eyes had always been averted, see—though I had ordered you to look straight on, I couldn't do so myself. How cowardly, and how very hypocritical of me…I have no excuse.*

I'll lay all of that bare before you.

"What I ran away from wasn't No.6. It was you," he said.

As expected, Shion didn't say a word, and his unblinking gaze remained fixed on Nezumi.

"I'm afraid of you," said Nezumi. "I've told you that before, too—that I can't comprehend a single thing inside your head."

"…Yeah."

"That was no lie—I truly can't understand you. Even when I thought I did, it was in fact only a small part of you that I had grasped, and the rest remained shrouded in fog. I couldn't comprehend you, and I still can't, no matter how hard I try. Does that make sense to you?"

“No, not one bit.”

“I figured as much—I don’t even really know how to explain it myself.”

Words were difficult—the harder he tried to explain what he meant, the more fruitless the effort. Even so, however, the person who stood before him had no tolerance for even the faintest of falsities.

“I was afraid,” he said, “because I felt like I would change if I were at your side, and I couldn’t predict exactly how. I felt like I might lose control of myself—and I had never experienced that before in my life.”

Something he had never experienced before, indeed.

There had been times when he had been pursued to the very end, and times when he had given up, thinking that he could go no further—countless times, in fact. There had never been a single moment, however, when he had felt he wasn’t in control of himself. No matter how dire the straits, no matter how desperate the circumstances he found himself in, he had never once lost sight of who he was.

Now, that was wavering.

By Shion’s side, he lost that tight grip on himself. Should he long for something other than No.6’s destruction? Should he find a way of life not built on a foundation of sworn revenge and ever-deepening loathing? Such questions had arisen in his mind regardless of his own desires, and thrown him into a state of conflicted confusion.

It was pure chaos. In the end, unable to bear being any more confused by himself as he changed, Nezumi had run away.

“No.6 had been destroyed, and so my role, too, had come to a close,” he said. “I thought that if I could convince myself of that, then it could be a sufficient reason to leave. Then I wouldn’t be running away from you, but simply leaving for a perfectly valid reason—or so I had tried to deceive myself. I…I can’t be like you. You can face yourself head-on, and confront who you really are, but—I wasn’t prepared to do the same with myself, back then. All I

could do was run away, and that's the truth of the matter."

"Nezumi," Shion said, shaking his head. "Sorry, but I don't get even half of what you're saying. You've always only ever been yourself—you were never anyone else, nor were you ever deceiving anyone. If you're going to insist that you ran away, though, there's something that I want to tell you, too. Something I *need* to tell you."

Shion pulled his arm back, clenching his fingers into a fist. "I asked what you were doing these past two years, after you had disappeared from my sight. I wanted to know what sort of life you led, and still do—I'm bursting at the seams from how *badly* I want to know." His fingers fell open again. "But right now, that's probably not what actually matters. What *does* matter is that…." A hand pressed into Nezumi's chest. "In this moment, you're here with me. If I reach my hand out, I can touch you like this. I can hear your voice, and feel your body. You're neither an illusion nor a memory—it's really *you*, standing right here. And that's…what I've been waiting for, this entire time."

Raising his chin, Shion continued, a note of challenge to his voice. "But I won't wait any longer." Heat radiated steadily from his palm. "You always wander, never lingering in any one place for too long, and I'm sure this time won't be any different. One day, once again, you'll leave No.6—maybe in a year, maybe in six months. Maybe even tomorrow."

"Actually, tomorrow seems a bit of a stretch, even for me," said Nezumi.

"And just how am I supposed to know that?" asked Shion. "You're so unpredictable; you might wave goodbye on a whim with no warning or time for me to mentally prepare myself—isn't that exactly what you did last time? Just a sudden 'I'm leaving tomorrow. Bye,' out of nowhere, and that was that."

"...Shion, that's not how it went, or are you just intentionally getting my line wrong? I would *never* say such an uninspired farewell."

With more strength than Nezumi thought possible, Shion shoved him in the chest, and he had to brace himself to avoid staggering.

"I'm going with you next time," he said, staring him right in the

eyes. “I’m not letting you go off alone."

“Do you understand what you're saying?" asked Nezumi.

"Of course I do."

“So you’ll throw away this place? You’ll throw away No.6?"

"I will."

“You’ll throw away your life here, and your job and your position?"

"I will."

"...What about Karan?”

Shion held his breath, then after a long silence, opened his mouth. "I'm going with you next time—that's what I’ve decided."

He wasn’t stating a mere wish, but rather declaring his final decision. Nezumi felt nearly overcome.

“Hang on, Shion, you can't just decide that on your own—I haven't said a word about taking you with me."

"I'm not asking you to take me with you,” countered Shion. “I’ve made up my mind to go with you—I’m simply letting you know." He sighed, then continued. "I won't just stand there and see you off again, or wait here clinging to your promise—I’ve made this decision for my own sake.”

You won’t go back on your decision—that’s what you mean, isn’t it? No matter what anyone else says?

Ah, so it is. Nezumi was about ready to give in.

Shion was intense. That intensity wasn’t the opposite of his usual self, nor was it out of character for him—passionate feelings had always simmered deep within his core, on the verge of boiling over at any moment.

He let out a breath.

Perhaps it might not be so bad to let himself succumb to those intense, brilliant blue waves. Perhaps that was the real reason he came back—that he couldn’t forget that intensity. If so, then the outcome of this match had been decided from the start.

“I suppose you'll just do whatever you want,” he said, the words coming out short and curt, unlike his thoughts.

"Yeah. I'll just do whatever I want,“ answered Shion with a small grin, almost childishly. His fingers caressed Nezumi's cheek, slipping upwards and back to brush past his ear, then pulled undone the black rubber tie in his hair. Nezumi’s hair fell loose to his shoulders.

“I’d always wanted to tell you this,” he said, a smile still on his face, “but with your hair down, you look a little younger.”

Nezumi's vision suddenly wavered.

Ah. When you look at me, you still see who I was that night, don't you? You see my twelve year old self, soaked to the bone and bleeding.

Nezumi lifted Shion's chin ever so slightly.

But you see, Shion, memory is memory, not reality—the only thing that should hold us captive now is the very reality before us, he whispered in his mind, and as he did, he was swayed once more by that scene coming to life again.

In the midst of all that torrential wind and rain, a window suddenly opened, and a young boy, arms thrown wide, cried out, almost as if he were saying, “Come on in!” Somehow, beyond the realm of all possibility, Nezumi heard a voice calling out for him to *come here.*

Hope and healing—to Nezumi, those words *were* that very scene, that very cry itself. It transcended language—he could use every word he knew in an effort to explain it, but likely no one would ever understand—perhaps not even Shion. Regardless, the indisputable truth was that the word “hope” and the word “healing” had appeared to him in the form of one young boy. That truth was engraved deep into his heart. And yet….

And yet…only the reality before me right now is what I should be captive to.

He covered Shion's lips with his own. Shion's fingers tangled languidly in his hair.

The lamp’s flame sputtered, and together, their two shadows danced.

Time flowed like a gentle melody.

"Shion." Nezumi drew a finger along Shion’s dampened lips. “You’ve become quite the proficient kisser in the time since I last saw you.”

"Right? I’ve been practicing for this very day.”

“What, is telling jokes right after kissing also part of that practice? I certainly can't say you're great at reading the mood, then.”

"Nezumi."

"Yes?"

"Delay one year for me."

He studied Shion. Shion wasn't smiling, nor were his eyes damp any longer.

"In one year, the mayor and assembly will be chosen," explained Shion. "We're holding an election, one where no power will be permitted to interfere—not in the slightest."

"So you want to see that through, do you?"

"I believe I have a responsibility to do so."

The responsibility on the shoulders of the one to whom it was entrusted, and the mission given to the one who survived, Nezumi thought. *I wonder—one year from now, will you be able to set aside the burden of all that?*

"Shion, there's something I need to talk to you about, too—this time, with respect to your role at the top of No.6, as chairman of the Restructural Committee."

"Destruction is on its way. Is that it?"

"That's right, although there isn't all that much I can say about it. Even so....."

Cheep cheep cheep. All of a sudden, the three mice began to chirp, and the black dog stood up.

What is it? Nezumi thought, but holding back the urge to ask what was wrong, he instead strained his ears to listen.

Something was happening outside....

Opening the door, he raced up the stairs. This time, the moment the door opened, he felt a faint—but certain—sense that something was *wrong*. He continued to run without pause, bursting through the forest, and eventually he arrived at the top of a moderately tall hill.

"Oh...."

A column of flames rose from a corner of the old West Block. Carried on the wind was the sound of ambulance sirens rising from the old city of No.6 as well—something was happening there, too.

So it had begun.

"Nezumi...." Shion said hoarsely, standing at his side. "Nezumi, this is bad—hang on, isn't that the area Inukashi's hotel is in?"

"What? Inukashi? There's no way—"

This time, Shion ran down ahead of him, and Nezumi followed after.

The heat of the flames had no reason to reach this far, and yet he felt a blast of hot wind. A bird soared overhead, and as they ran together toward the flames, its cry rang out in the evening sky.

(To be continued in *No.6 Reunion* #2.)

Afterword

Two years may have passed in the story, but in real life, it has been fourteen years. To you, with whom I have reunited, please let me first express my gratitude.

Thank you for waiting all this time, and then, my apologies for making you wait for so long. It has taken me fourteen years to reunite Shion and Nezumi.

The reason for that was…that I couldn't fully conclude the series titled *No.6*. I could't see Shion and Nezumi's final conflict through to the end, and I instead offloaded its outcome to the being called Elyurias.

Doing that was nothing short of stealing that conflict from those two boys. They wagered their bodies, hearts, minds, and all of their existence in challenge, and yet I couldn't grant them even that. This thought has weighed on me these past fourteen years, and for all that time, I heard the question countless times: *are you going to let yourself just lose like that?*

I still don't know if that voice was Shion, Nezumi, you, or me, but I decided that one more time—just one more time—I would take on their fight by their side. Just one more time. Just like the single chance Nezumi and Shion received from Elyurias, this must be my one chance to redeem myself in their eyes. No matter what happens, I won't let it be for nothing.

Beginning with all of my editors, there are countless people to whom I must convey my gratitude for staying at my side these past fourteen years, but my present self doesn't have that kind of time. One day, once Shion and Nezumi and I have fought our fight to the end—when I have *truly* been able to see it through—I'll do that all over again.

Asano Atsuko, 2025

Translation Team Closing Remarks

Dear reader,
Reunion has come! What a journey we have been on together.

I read *No.6* for the first time as a middle school student. I had already been studying Japanese for a little bit at that point, but it was *No.6* that really drove me to learn in earnest, and at fifteen years old, *No.6 #1* was the first novel I read cover to cover in Japanese. I have returned to the series many times in the years since. What joyous serendipity to have the privilege of translating the continuation of the story that has been so close to my heart for half of my life, and that is the reason I have the Japanese proficiency to be able to do so in the first place!

It has been a gift to grow alongside Nezumi and Shion over these long years—not just in terms of getting older, but in understanding of the complex themes that they wrestle with of totalitarianism and

colonialism, the role of the individual versus the state, and what to do in the face of overwhelming injustice and atrocities committed against other human beings by human hands. Asano has always written *No.6* as an attempt to make sense of the brokenness she sees in the world, so it feels bittersweet that, fourteen years after the conclusion of the original series, she has returned with *No.6 Reunion*—the state of the world feels so bleak right now, and it's easy to feel powerless to do anything about it.

It is my hope, however, that through this English translation of Asano's work that English-speaking fans like you and I are able to not just open our eyes to the world and see it for what it is (just like Nezumi tells Shion to do), but that we won't stop at that—that our hearts will be moved to build something better in our own communities like Shion has strived to accomplish in No.6 Reunion. May the penultimate line of the original No.6 series be true for us as well:

NO.6。そう呼ばれた都市が、この地に存在した。
No.6—a city by that name once existed in this place.

A standing ovation to my editing team for seeing this project through to the end. Jay, Ren, Aleks, and Glitter—the success of this translation is due to the incredible amount of hard work you have poured into it. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

And to you, dear reader, thank you for your love and support. Your enthusiasm for *No.6* means everything to me. How wonderful to be celebrating reunion with you!

All my love,
elrohir

⁂

Reunion has finally come... to think we could see this day! I still remember the night in highschool I cried myself to sleep after the last episode had aired, the dawn I

finished the last volume after reading through the night, and the years which followed that I spent longing to see the two's journey continue.

I've worked in fantranslation for many years, but never did I imagine that one day I would be involved with the No.6 sequel itself, let alone even be able to experience the revival of a series I've spent half of my life awaiting. This is the biggest and most ambitious translation project I've been involved with yet, and I keep feeling that in a sense all my past experience has led up to this! I hope you enjoy reading it just as much as we have enjoyed working on it — we've spent many a long night in our efforts to make it the best reading experience possible that I look forward to many more of.

The world of *No.6* is unfortunately more relevant than ever in today's times, but so is the story of humanity's strength and tenderness, and the precious individuals who fight to live, to connect, and to love in

the midst of it all. Asano writes with so much love for the fictional world and characters she's crafted, but that love is a reflection of her feelings for the real world, and her unwavering belief in the hearts and resolve of mankind. Where the sequel will go is anyone's guess, but I for one cannot wait to see where Asano takes it.

El's dedication cannot be understated as well—she has worked tirelessly to have the entire book translated by the actual release date in Japan, just so that the English fandom did not have to wait a moment longer to start reading; an unprecedented feat, as far as I know, in the world of fantranslation! It is through her passion that this entire novel can be read fully in English barely even a month after its original release, so I hope everyone can appreciate the significance of her efforts.

Finally, a heartfelt thanks to El for her incredible hard work and for allowing me the honour of editing it, to Aleks, Glitter and Ren for all their hard work as our beta

readers, and of course, to you all for reading and enjoying! See you all next time for Volume 2!

- Jay

⁂

I don't think I could say it more eloquently than El does, but a couple words about this project. I came to fandom very late, via an anime that my daughter coerced me into watching. I was hooked, and went looking for something with similar themes. I found a top ten BL anime list somewhere, and *No.6* was at the very top. I fell in love with it, read the manga and eventually the novels, and generally went into fangirl overdrive about Shion and Nezumi. I was left howling for more after that epic ending, but I didn't think I'd even see a canon reunion. Which is why, when I saw that El was translating the new one, I had to be a part of the project! Everyone working on this has been great, and worked so hard to make this translation the best that it can be. I'm proud to have

my name on it, and I hope you all love it just as much! Thank you El and fellow betas! ＜3

- Glitter

⁂

Nezumi and Shion and their journey have been so important to me since I was young; I first came across *No.6* over a decade ago, and I have loved them ever since. At the time, I had been so devastated over the promise of a reunion that we did not get to see. I honestly thought that a sequel series would never come, and reunion would remain something that exists only in our imaginations. But we have made it, and reunion has finally come to the world of *No.6* again! It is so lovely to see, and every chapter released by our wonderful translator has been such a joy to read through. I was so delighted to be invited to work on a project and book that means so much to me. Thank you so much to our wonderful translator, editor, and other beta readers for all of their hard work! And

thank you to the fantastic readers for sticking with us for such a beautiful reunion. Until the next volume.

- Ren

⁂

It's hard for me to put into words just how important this series and these characters have been to me for almost a decade now. I remember sitting on my couch in January of 2016, when for the first time in my life I felt the real weight of impending political change, and knowing as I cried and watched the last episode of *No.6* that this was a story that would stay with me forever and impact how I moved forward in the world from then on. I have spent a not insignificant amount of time since then talking, thinking, and writing about *No.6* (to the loving annoyance of the people around me). Everytime, I discover something I had not seen before, and every time, it feels like I have been able to better understand not only the story, but parts of myself.

I truly never thought that we would reach this point; that reunion would be not only an event that canonically takes place, but that a whole new series of books would come along with it! With the original series coming at a time when we had begun to see the rise of the modern surveillance state, we now, over 20 years later, are seeing a culmination of that system, and the world of *No.6* feels perhaps closer than ever. But with Reunion, Asano reminds us that simply destroying a corrupt system is not enough, and that the real hard work only begins when it is time to build something new in the aftermath of destruction. It is my hope that as we all live through these times together and fight for what we believe in, we can remember this message for when our turn to rebuild inevitably comes.

Thank you so much to El for not only dedicating so much time and effort to translating this book and having it ready for us to read along with the Japanese fans, but for allowing me to play even a

small role in bringing this story that has impacted me so strongly for so long to life! It really is a dream come true for me. And a huge thank you as well to our editor Jay and my fellow beta readers Glitter and Ren for all the hard work they have put in over the past few months to make this translation the best it can possibly be. Looking forward to seeing you all again for Volume 2 in the fall!

- Aleks

The sky was a brilliant blue, so vivid Shion had to squint to look at it.

The paved road to the North Block transitioned into dirt partway through. With the combination of yesterday's rain and today's sun, its packed earth was a deeper hue than usual, and seemed almost to glow with an inner luminescence.

"Nezumi," he called out, and the figure walking ahead of him stopped. Falling into step beside Nezumi, he pointed at the grass at the side of the road.

"In spring," he said,"flowers will bloom here, a whole field of little white blossoms—did you know that?"

Nezumi paused in his tracks and stared at him for a brief moment. "What are they called?"

"Huh?" *The flower's name, you ask…?* "I dunno."

"You don't know?" said Nezumi. "You mean *you* brought up a flower you don't even know the name of?"

"I did, but…hey, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Ah, no, I just thought that was unusual for you," said Nezumi. "If you couldn't explain its group and genus, where it grows, whether it's perennial or annual, the exact shape of its petals and leaves, and so on…then, well, I didn't think you'd have mentioned it to begin with."

"Nezumi, are you making fun of me?" asked Shion. "The world is full of things I don't know—I'm aware of at least *that* much. Not to mention that even *I* don't think that everything can be neatly explained away just with pure knowledge."

The world was full of the unknown.

The shape of present reality, the hearts of people, the names of wildflowers—they all remain unknown to me, he thought. *Nezumi, what are you thinking about? What's on your mind as you walk this road? What do you know about* me*?*

Nezumi raised his eyes to the sky. Its blue brilliance was perfectly clear, with only a handful of soft, plump clouds floating lazily northwards—a sky like this meant that it would soon be spring.

“Knowledge is important, no matter the circumstances,” said Nezumi. He returned his gaze to Shion. “So is the intellect to use that knowledge to its fullest potential.”

He was right, of course. Knowledge without the intelligence to put it to use wasn’t worth a dime, and neither was knowledge without empathy. *Nezumi, you were the one who drilled into me the worthlessness of so many things I once held dear.*

Nezumi let out a breath. “You know what it’s like.”

“Huh?”

“You know what it’s like both inside and outside the walls of No.6,” he said. “Not as objective information, but by your own first-hand experience.”

“Yeah….”

Shion had been on both sides—both sides of those towering walls which had once separated *inside* from *outside*. He had lived on both sides, and had gone about his daily life on both sides. If he were to measure those two experiences simply by counting the months and years, then his time inside won out overwhelmingly, but the richness of his life had been far greater while outside.

The pounding of his pulse. Raw, visceral reactions. Fear so terrible he felt nearly torn in two. His heart, drawn irresistibly towards another. The earnest desire to *survive*. How to live in hope, how to think deeply and articulate such thoughts with eloquence. The urge to mention a flower in a season it didn’t bloom, welling up inside his chest.

Each and every single one of those was something he had learned outside of the walls.

“There’s no question that you have the knowledge, so how will you put it to full use?” Nezumi said. “Everything begins *now*, Shion.

But….”

“But?”

“Nah, it’s nothing.” He started walking.

Can’t I go with you, Nezumi? Shion whispered in his heart. Those words had been a ceaseless murmur within him since they had left the house…. No, since last night, when Nezumi had announced his intent to depart. Those murmurs had tangled together, become a lump in his throat, and were threatening to burst forth.

Are you leaving, then? If you do, will I ever see you again? If not…if not…I couldn’t possibly endure that.

Shall I try to take your arm? Shall I take your arm and cry out for you not to go?

“Wait, please wait! Oh, do wait up!” called a shrill, breathless voice.

Shion turned to look.

There stood a woman, holding the hand of a young girl. “You’re… Shion, yes?” she asked. “You are him, aren’t you? The one who stopped the civil unrest at the Moondrop…. I’d recognize that white hair and red scar anywhere.”

“What? Er, um, I didn’t exactly stop the civil unrest. I didn’t do anything of the sort….”

“Please save us!”

“Come again? *Save* you?” Shion immediately glanced around at his surroundings, thinking that she was being chased by someone, but there was no one there. The woman wore leather boots and a thick jacket of good make, and the girl was clad in a soft white overcoat —one hardly saw people dressed to the nines on such outings even in Lost Town, let alone the West Block.

“The walls all collapsed, I heard, and there’s a violent mob charging over from the West Block,” said the woman.

“What?”

“People are saying that rioters are pillaging and setting fire to people’s homes, and that every single citizen of No.6 is going to be killed—especially residents of Chronos like us…. Isn’t Lost Town already ablaze in a sea of flames? And everyone all dead? Please, save us!” The woman continued. “I-I don’t know where to run. And my daughter’s with me—where should we go…? There’s no way we can survive outside of No.6, but we’ll be killed if we stay here—the rioters are going to get us! I-I’m…so scared! *Everyone* is! B-but…no one is doing a thing about any of it! There’s nowhere to run. The two of us made it this far, but there’s nowhere to go from here. Surely you don’t expect us to live outside No.6! Please, save us! I’m begging you…!”

“Ma’am, please calm down,” Shion said, reaching out to help the inconsolable woman to her feet. The girl looked up at him with beautiful light brown eyes. While she wasn’t weeping like her mother, her gaze told Shion that she was at a loss for what to do. “Don’t worry, there aren’t any riots at all,” he said. “I’ve just come from Lost Town—not a bit of it was on fire, and everyone’s just been going about their daily lives.”

“O-Oh, is that so…?” stammered the woman. “Everyone’s been saying that those people resent us for oppressing them, and for living such opulent lives, and that they’ll kill us all….”

“Are rumors like that really spreading?”

“They are, yes, but—I had no idea any of that was happening! I knew nothing about what life was like for West Block residents! I had no idea that we’d been oppressing anyone at all!”

It’s not that you knew nothing, Shion thought to himself, *but that you didn’t even* try *to know in the first place—not in the slightest. Consciously turning one’s back, or not even trying to educate oneself in the first place—tell me, which sin weighs heavier?*

“Chronos is in absolute chaos,” the woman continued. “There’s another rumor circulating that the airport has been shut down, and everyone is up in arms, crying and yelling and screaming….”

“Please go home,” Shion said. “Go home, and let Chronos know

there's nothing to be concerned about."

"What…?"

"There may still be disorder around the city center, but it'll all be back to normal in no time—I'd like you to tell that to everyone in Chronos, especially since there should also be an official announcement about it from the city sometime today."

"You…want *me* to do that?"

"Yes, *you*."

They had to calm the chaos using any medium and methods available, whether through official announcements, social media, mass media, or word of mouth; they had to make the truth known over all the false rumors, fake news, and emotionally charged empty nonsense.

They had yet to take even that first step.

"Mom, let's go," said the little girl, tugging on her mother's hand. "Let's do what he said, and go home and tell everybody."

"Ah, alright. Yes…let's do that…."

Led along by her daughter, the woman departed, heading towards Chronos. Shion ran ahead back to Nezumi, who had been standing a little ways away.

"Shion," he said, calling him by name.

"Yeah?"

"Your intellect's the real deal—first-class, really."

"Flattering me, are you?"

"No. I'm simply acknowledging it."

Nezumi's eyes briefly narrowed, as if he were enduring some pain.

He was completely aware of it all—aware that Shion was going to stay behind here and involve himself in No.6's rebirth, and he understood full well just how difficult and demanding that would be. Even so, he intended to leave.

Can I not go with you? Shion thought. *I want you by my side, and I want to be at yours. No matter how much I wish for that, though, you'll never grant it—I know you won't. So, please promise me, at least. Promise* reunion. *That one word is all I ask for.*

Overhead, a bird of prey cried out, and for a brief, silent moment, the two boys watched it circle in the brilliant blue sky.

“Got it, Shion? Come now, smile—you’ve got to *smile*,” said Nezumi at his side. “Don’t look so stiff. Why is your face so tense? You’re not smiling, just showing me your teeth—try for something a little more natural and pleasant.”

Shion gave Nezumi his best grimace. “Shut it. Can’t you see I’m already giving it all I’ve got? How can you expect me to manage something natural and pleasant? —Ouch!”

Nezumi had tugged on his ear, grip light but firm enough to make Shion wince with pain. “Doesn’t matter whether or not you can—just do it,” he said. “Think of what a feast tonight’s dinner will be, all thanks to you flashing a nice smile. Come on, don’t give up now.”

“Wasn’t expecting you to fuss about the dinner menu,” said Shion.

“Food’s important, Shion. If you don’t eat, you don’t live. Give me fresh-baked bread over a philosophy lecture any day. Anyway, go on, show her those pearly

whites.” Thumping Shion lightly on the shoulder, Nezumi stepped a few paces back.

In a corner of the West Block’s market was a small bakery which sold not only bread, but also a small variety of other miscellaneous goods. Most shops in the market did the same—the butcher had more on offer than just meat, and fish weren’t the only thing the fishmonger had in stock. Shops here tended to sell whatever their owners had managed to get their hands on that day: one might find a cracked lid or a ratty cloak next to a pig's head or goat shank, or a scrawny whole chicken might be strung up next to a mystery stew of inscrutable ingredients.

No matter the goods, however, a person was counted lucky if they could afford to buy anything at all. Those without two coins to rub together for even a scrap of bread were left to stare greedily at said goat shank or drool over the mystery stew’s aroma, and, with a great shout and an even bigger cudgel, shopkeepers drove

such people away without a hint of pity.

This particular bakery was comparatively large for the market, and so had the kind of grocery sundries one might expect of such a shop. From its depths emerged the proprietress, a plump woman holding a cloth bag full to bursting.

“This enough flour for you, darling?” she asked, handing the bag over to Shion, which he found to be generously heavy.

“Huh, all this? Are you sure?” he asked, amazed.

“Why, of course,” she insisted. “Take it—it’s yours.”

“But surely this is way more than what I paid for. Um, ma’am—”

“It’s Sasha.”

“Pardon?”

“Sasha. That’s my name,” said the shopkeeper—or Sasha, rather, placing a

hand on the swell of her chest. “And you?”

“Ah, well, I-I’m Shion.”

“Why, isn’t that a wonderful name? It suits you perfectly, Shion.”

“Ah, um, thank you very much. But, uh, Mrs. Tasha, I don’t have any more money on me and really can’t pay more than what I already gave you….”

“It’s an ’S’, not a ’T,’” Nezumi whispered under his breath behind Shion. “Her name’s Sasha—get it right. And don’t forget to smile.”

“Oh, er, right. Mrs. Sasha, I mean, I really can’t accept….” stammered Shion.

“Please, drop the formalities—just Sasha is fine, sweetheart,” she said. “The flour’s on the house, I insist. The price of pure, genuine flour is through the roof right now, and what you paid me wouldn’t even cover half of what’s in that bag, of course, but leaving a young man in his prime to

survive off of only half a slice of bread a day…why, I could never! Here, I'll throw in some eggs and milk for you, too, and a little butter. Make pancakes or something as a treat for yourself, okay? Don't hold back, now!" Sasha pressed three eggs and a jar of milk into his hands.

"Um, but, you already gave me some cheese yesterday, and…."

"I did, didn't I? Haha, I'm sure even that wasn't enough to satisfy you, though—my heart just breaks to think of you going about on an empty stomach at your age."

Sasha reached out and brushed her fingers against Shion's cheek. "My, but don't you have the loveliest, smoothest skin a girl's ever seen? Your hair has the most beautiful sheen, too, despite its color. And this scar of yours: what's the story behind it, honey? I've never seen one quite like it—I haven't been able to get it out of my mind since yesterday."

She traced her finger slowly along his scar.

Instinctively, he tried to take a step back, but Nezumi pushed at him from behind.

“Um, well, it’s a long story….” hedged Shion.

“Oh? Well, everyone has their stories,” said Sasha. “So does this scar run down the rest of your body, too?”

“E-Er, yes, it goes all the way down….”

“Goodness me, like a red snake’s coiled all around you?”

“…I guess.”

Sasha gave him a smirk. Shion tried to smile back, but his lips wouldn’t cooperate.

“U-Um, Mrs. Sasha, uh, thank you for your kindness,” he said, “but I truly can’t accept your generosity without giving anything in return. If there’s anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

“My word, Shion, what a sweet little boy you are,” she said. “If you really insist,

then I must say my doors have been giving me some trouble. Both my back door and the one to my bedroom have broken hinges, you see, and the knobs aren't working quite right—it's really got me in a bind. I'd be ever so grateful if you could fix them for me."

"So just the knobs and the hinges? I think I can do something about them, at least."

Sasha let out a coy little laugh. "You can, honey? Then how about you come by after I've closed up shop tonight?"

"Um, tonight? I don't know about that…. Small, intricate repairs like that are impossible to do by just lamplight." The West Block had no power grid—at night, one had no choice but to rely on lamps, and Shion wasn't confident that he could make any progress by just the dim light of one. "And tomorrow I have to go help Inukashi dig some graves…but the day after that—how does the morning after tomorrow sound, Sasha? I can come by

first thing before you open."

Sasha drew back briefly, studying him with a long, startled look before throwing her head back with laughter. "Ahahaha! Bless your heart, aren't you really something? A promise for the day after tomorrow? Can't say I've ever made one of those before! Haha, well then, Shion—a promise is a promise. Come by the morning after next."

"I'll see you then."

"I'll be waiting. It's the door to my bedroom that really needs a special touch, alright?"

"Got it. I think I can fix you right up."

"'Fix me right up,' hm? Looking forward to it, sugar."

Behind Shion, Nezumi let out a quiet sigh.

⁂

"What the hell, man, you mean that broad gave ya eggs and milk for *free*?" Inukashi's eyes darted wildly between the flour, the

eggs, and the milk. “Are ya messin’ with me? Everyone at the market knows how damn stingy she is. She’s the type to hire a guy built like a brick shithouse just to wallop you if ya even think about stealin’ from her, no matter if you’re an old fart or some snotty brat. Man, I can’t believe she gave you all this shit without chargin’ you.” Shaking their head, they surveyed the milk and eggs set out on the table.

Nezumi gave a low chuckle. “It’s all thanks to Shion, of course. Shion, I didn’t know you had it in you—so you really can do whatever you put your mind to, can’t you? Quite the stellar performance, really.”

“I honestly didn’t do anything special,” Shion said. “I couldn’t even smile all that nicely the way you told me to…. Ah, Inukashi—could you give the eggs a good whisk and add a bit more sugar?”

“On it, boss,” said Inukashi. “Hehe, wow. Pancakes—what a treat! I’d heard of ‘em before, but never had some myself. Who’d

ever think I'd see the day! I guess good things do come to those who wait, huh? Hey, can I eat the eggshells?"

Nezumi clicked his tongue. "Eat whatever you want, Inukashi, but you're on your own."

"Hey, what's with that!? Oh, they're not bad."

"Remind me why you're even here, again?" asked Nezumi. "You think you have a right to eat our pancakes? You didn't even lift a finger for them—the sheer audacity!"

"I invited them over," Shion said. "Inukashi was kind enough to bring the sugar and the frying pan, after all. Or did you expect us to cook pancakes directly on top of the burner, huh? Not to mention pancakes taste better with a little sugar, and don't you think it's more fun to eat all together with everyone?"

"'Everyone?' Shion, just how long is the guest list, exactly?"

“Well, I wanted to invite Rikiga-san, but couldn’t get a hold of him—I sent one of Inukashi’s dogs along with an invite, but it couldn’t find any trace of him whatsoever. And then I thought it would be nice to share some pancakes with Rico and Karan, too,” Shion said. “Ah, Inukashi—I don’t think we should use up all the flour at once.”

“Why not?”

“Well, if we want to have some later on, wouldn’t saving some of it be a….”

…*Good idea?* The words were swallowed down before he could say them aloud.

In the West Block, no one considered what the future might hold—no one had any hope they’d even make it to tomorrow. Shion suddenly recalled Sasha’s outburst of laughter.

She laughed at the concept of making a promise for the day after tomorrow—at me,

who would even dare to make an empty promise like that.

“I wonder if I can keep my promise to her, the day after tomorrow,” he mused aloud.

Nezumi silently shrugged.

“A promise for the day after tomorrow? What’re you going on about?” asked Inukashi.

“I promised Sasha—well, the woman who runs the bakery—that I’d fix her bedroom door the day after tomorrow.”

Eggshells still in hand, Inukashi paused for a moment, blinking three times. They then gave a nod. “Ohhh. So that’s what happened, huh, Nezumi?”

“That’s exactly it,” Nezumi confirmed.

“Huh? What?” asked Shion. “What do you mean by ‘that’s what happened,’ Inukashi?”

“Nezumi, I’ll handle the mixing, so pour in

the milk slowly, yeah?" said Inukashi. "Heh heh, wow, this is so exciting."

"I'll take care of the frying," Nezumi said. "Properly controlling the heat for this can be pretty hard."

"Nezumi, Inukashi," Shion said, more loudly this time. "You're both dodging my question. Sure, finding a needle in a haystack might be easier than keeping a promise for the day after tomorrow—but a promise is still a promise, y'know? I gave Sasha my word, and she accepted it."

"Yeah, I bet she did," said Inukashi, a smirk on their face. "That broad *loves* younger guys."

"Huh?"

"Screw macho, tough guys—delicate, earnest, eager-to-please pretty boys are what she really goes for. And if he's a virgin? Then damn, that's the cherry on top of it all! I can just imagine what she'd say, like, 'Let me teach you what a real

woman can do, sweetie,'" Inukashi continued. "Shion, you're just her type, if you get my drift. Man, I can't believe she asked you to fix the door to her frickin' bedroom."

"Not to mention," Nezumi added, "she seemed pretty into that scar you've got all wrapped around your body. I bet she would touch it all over for you—in bed."

"In bed…." Shion staggered. His back collided with the bookshelf, and several books came tumbling down.

In a panic, Inukashi leaned forward to shield the mixing bowl, and a book hit them in the back and fell to the floor. Nezumi leapt backwards, clutching the jar of milk.

"What the hell, dumbass, you almost ruined all our pancakes!" said Inukashi. "Fuck, that book hit me right in the spine. You owe me an extra pancake to make up for it."

“I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“I can’t—I can’t do this. I’m gonna go return the eggs and milk. I-I can’t keep my promise. There’s just no way.”

“Why not, man? It’s not like she’s gonna gobble you up headfirst. Why don’t ya learn a few things from a hot older woman? It might open your eyes a little.”

“I-I don’t want to. Just thinking about doing that kind of thing for only a few eggs and some milk, it…it makes me feel sick.”

“Are you for real? There’re plenty of chicks —and guys, too—who would do more for way less than that. Eggs and milk? Gimme a break. Folks around here sell themselves for one measly little piece of bread.” said Inukashi. “Nezumi, hurry your ass up and put some butter in the pan already.”

Folks sell themselves for one measly little piece of bread—and if they don’t, they won’t

survive.

Inukashi's words pierced right through him, and he bit his lip.

I don't want to. He had thought he understood what a luxury it was to be able to be able to say no—to be able to refuse something at all with just those few short words. In reality, though, thinking he understood something and truly understanding it were two different things, and in the end, what he actually understood was nothing.

"Shion," said Nezumi, putting the milk back on the table. "You probably won't be able to keep your promise, anyway."

Inukashi looked up, a tense expression on their face.

He wouldn't be able to keep his promise for the day after tomorrow because something might happen before he could…. Was that what Nezumi thought?

“If the idea of sleeping with Sasha upsets you so much,” began Nezumi. “then what kind of person would you be fine with?”

“Huh…?”

“What kind of person would you fix a bedroom door for before contenting yourself to getting ravished on their bed? Tell me, Shion.”

“W-Why should I have to tell you something like that?”

“There’s no better topic to discuss over pancakes, don’t you think?”

“I can’t think of anything worse,” Shion said. “W-Well, what about you?”

“Me? Well, unlike you, I have experience aplenty. I’d be happy to share the details, but it might be too hot for you to handle.”

“What, are you boasting, now?”

“Just stating the truth. I can tell you all about it if you’d like, though it might take

all night."

"Wow, what a generous offer. I'd simply love to hear all that you have to say. Spending the entire night listening to you wax lyrical about your love life doesn't sound bad at all. Bore me, though, and I'm off to bed immediately."

"Aw, all alone in bed? Sounds lonely, no?"

"As for me, *I* prefer someone with long fur," interjected Inukashi. "Someone who smells like sunlight when ya bury your face in them. But forget the bedroom for now—it's pancake time!"

They wiggled the frying pan, and Nezumi slowly poured in some batter. A light, sweet scent filled the room, and Inukashi let out a whistle. "Damn, it doesn't get any better than this. Nezumi, don't you mess up flippin' em, now."

"Leave it to me. I'll make you a pancake so good it'll leave you *squirming*."

“Is that really the only way you know how to describe it?” said Shion. “Your choice of words sucks.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from,” said Nezumi.

“C’mon, shut up and keep your mind on the job,” said Inukashi. “The first one’s gonna be all mine, yeah?”

The delicious aroma thickened. Nezumi wore an expression of serious concentration, and Inukashi looked over the moon. Shion couldn’t help but smile, too.

That had been the day before the Manhunt.

⁂

The walls of No.6 had come down not long ago, and Shion found himself standing in the ruins of where the marketplace had once been.

Not one trace of Sasha’s shop remained, and the blue splinters of her painted door

glistened in the sunlight.

He hadn’t been able to keep his promise.

On the final remains of her blue door,
Shion placed a single white flower.